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Dashing Dandy, THE HOTSPUR OF THE HILLS.

OR,
The Pony Prince's Strange Pard.

A Romance of the Colorado Mines.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR,
(U.S. Cavalry, U. S. Army,)
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL, THE BUCKSKIN KING,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

THREE ACTS OF A LIFE DRAMA.

ACT FIRST.

PITIFULLY the wind howled about the eaves of the houses; pitilessly it swept through the deserted streets, and its chill breath penetrated through many a time-worn crevice of the attic of a one-time—in the long ago—elegant home, fanning the fire upon the huge hearth, until the flickering flames caused the shadows of the scanty furniture to dance like grim specters upon the walls, and the logs to crackle, as if in laughter at the dancing specters, moving to the dirge-like music of the gale.

A large room, with poverty stamped upon every

article of furniture, as plainly seen by the firelight, for no lamp or candle shed forth a bright glare; a few rude chairs, a table, an antiquated bureau, and a cot-bed and old rocking-chair that held occupants, completed the picture of the comfortless scene within doors.

Lying upon the humble bed was a young woman, with face white as marble, and every feature stamped with suffering.

Once that face and form were exquisitely beautiful, and a belle among lovely women; scores of men had knelt in adoration before the charms of which now only the wreck remained; a human ruin fast crumbling to decay beneath the merciless touch of Death.

Slowly, calmly the tide of life was ebbing back into the sea of Eternity; the spirit-lamp was burning out, and the tortured soul quivering to soar on bended wing.

To realms where it had dreamed of rest,
Unveiled with a sigh or tear.

Seated in the rocking-chair, monotonously moving to and fro, like a pendulum marking the pulse-beats of the one on the cot, was an old woman, patiently waiting for the end to come; waiting for Death to stalk in and relieve her of her charge.

"How the wind howls to-night," muttered the old nurse, as she drew her shawl closer around her, and glanced at the emaciated form and upturned face upon the cot.

Suddenly she started, for a step was heard without, and the dying woman moved uneasily.

"Come in!"

The door swung slowly open and a man stepped within; a man of tall form and wearing a heavy cloak; a man whose pale, handsome face was stamped with sorrow, and in whose dark, burning eyes rested a look that was unfathomable.

"I seek one known here as Mrs. Cyril," said the man, in a constrained voice.

The nurse made no reply, but silently pointed to the bed.

Instantly the cloak and hat were thrown aside, and crossing the room the man knelt beside the cot, burying his proud, stern face in the pillow.

"What is she to you?" asked the nurse.

"The only one I have in the whole world to love; my sister," he said, sadly, and then added in a soft, plaintive tone:

"Come, Gertrude, you must get better and come home with me."

"You are too late; another already waits for her," said the nurse, in curt tones.

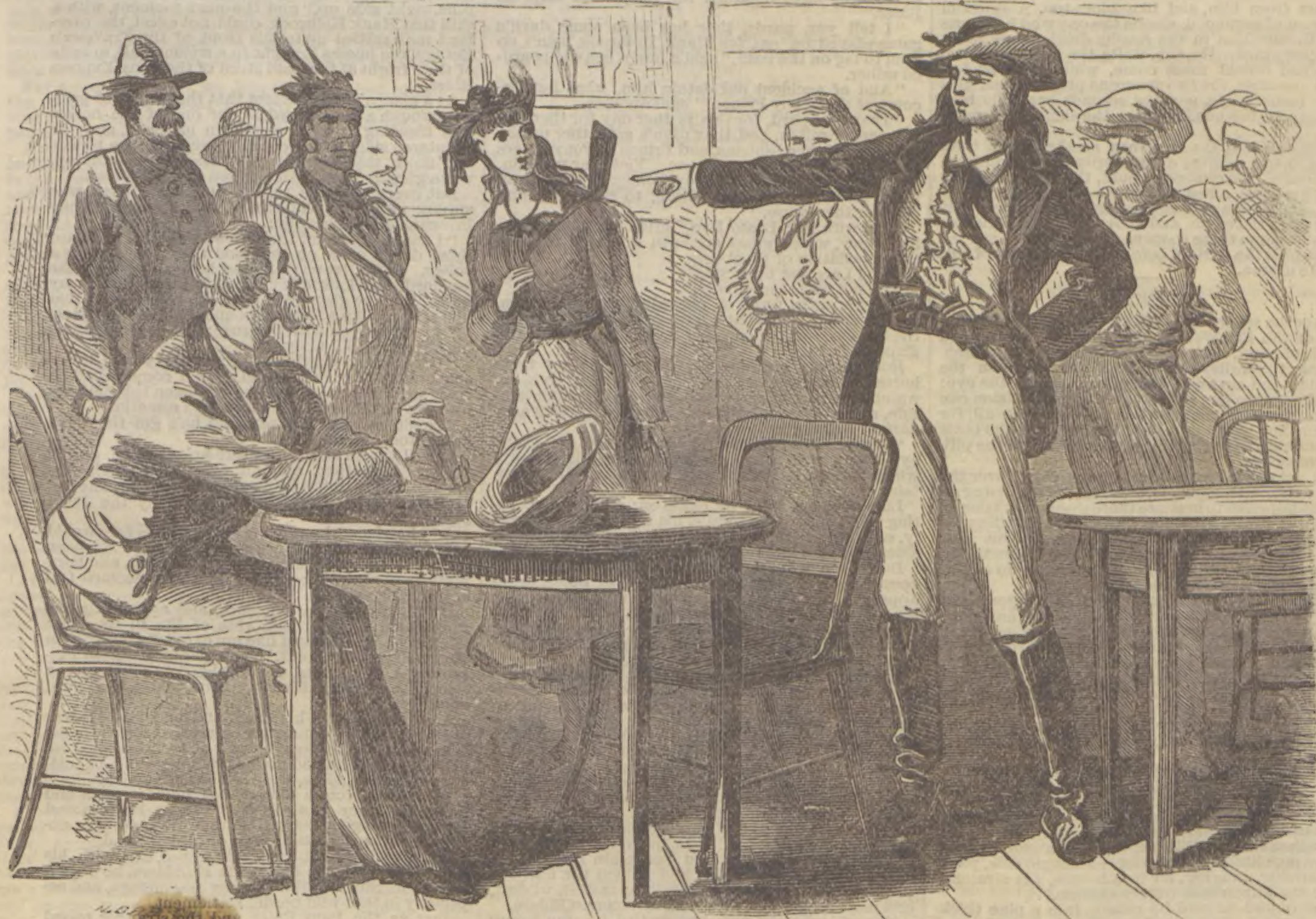
"Another? Who?" and the man sprung to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"The angel Death."

With a moan he sunk down again by the bedside, and in the same soft, pleading voice cried:

"No, no, Gertrude; you will not die now! See! I have come for you!"

Slowly the eyes of the dying woman opened, roved



"NOW, DEVIL DICK I AM READY FOR THE GAME: MY LIFE AGAINST FIREFLY."

Dashing Dandy.

restlessly about the room, and then rested upon the face bending over her, while faintly came one word: "Brother!"

"Yes, Gertrude; I have come to take you home."

"Too late!" came almost in a whisper, and then distinctly said the dying woman:

"Guy, my brother, forgive me!"

"With all my heart, Gertrude; but—"

"No, no, do not say that," she cried, as she held him rise to his feet suddenly, and added in a voice almost inaudible:

"Forgive him, too!"

"Never! I vow it before high Heaven! Never! and by my hand he shall die!"

"Hold! make no vow to kill, in the presence of the dead!"

The tall form of the nurse stood by the side of the strong man, and her long, bony finger pointed at the upturned face before them, the eyes wide open, and fixed upon her brother with a stare of horror, the lips apart, the heart now pulseless, and the seal of Death stamped upon her brow.

"Great God! she is dead!" broke from the lips of the man in tones that seemed wrung from the heart.

"Yes."

"And he has killed her! Woe be unto that man that ever he was born!"

With a groan he sunk again upon his knees and buried his face in his trembling hands, and before this sad scene, the first act in this o'er true story, I will draw the curtain.

ACT SECOND.

It is night in a southern land. The full moon piercing the fleecy clouds that ever and anon drift across the skies, like ships sailing homeward, silvers the dewdrops upon the leaves and grass, and turns into millions of precious stones of all hues the spray, as the surf breaks with angry roar upon the beach, as though vexed at being checked by *terra firma*.

The white beach glitters like a satin ribbon around the shore, its curving line broken in one place by dark forms, as a group of half a dozen men move to and fro, subdued, silent and expectant.

One of those men the reader has seen before; the others are strangers.

That one is the proud, strong man who made a vow to take the life of a fellow-being over the dead body of his sister.

A month she has lain in her grave in the little burying-ground of the old family homestead, and he has come to that quiet, moonlit scene to keep his vow.

Come to break the silence of sea and land with the ring of the deadly pistol: to fright with a death-knell the sweet songster of the magnolia forest:

The mock-bird of the sweet south clime,
Pealing its notes on high,
While far away in musical chime
They awake an answering cry.

He has come to mingle the crack of firearms with the moaning surf, telling its story to the smooth pebbles on the beach—he has come to take the life of a human being, and avenge a wrong done in the past.

Standing alone is that man whose mission there is to kill, gazing in stern silence across the waters, dancing under the flower-laden winds, his face white and determined, his hand and nerve like iron.

Apart from him, and like him, too, a splendid specimen of manhood, stands the one who has come there to meet him in the deadly duello—pale, stern and determined. He, too, waits the moment when the dread ordeal must come, while, with professional coolness, the two surgeons prepare their glittering instruments, and the seconds carefully load the weapons intended to sever the slender thread of life.

A low call, and the two men awaken from their dream to sad reality; a few words of caution from each second, the ominous count, the flash, the ring of both pistols, a heavy thud as a body strikes the earth, and the scene has changed; the avenger lies prone upon the earth, and above him bends the one whom he came there to slay.

Thus falls the curtain before the second act of this real life drama.

ACT THIRD.

AGAIN the scenes are shifted; we are in the mountains of the Far West, where, over all, is spread a mantle of snow, with large, white flakes still falling.

Along the valley, on the hillside, or upon the mountain-top, no habitation of man meets the eye; all is desolation and solitude as far as the vision can reach. A silence that can be felt rests upon all, for the prowling wolf has sought his lair, and the birds of the forest have found refuge away from the pitiless storm.

And yet one solitary object moves along over the white surface; staggering, tottering, yet pressing on against hope, for to hesitate there were to seek death.

Rushing ahead, groaning with pain, struggling for life, dreading death, the man continues his way along the snow-clad valley, until at last human nature can stand no more, and he comes to a halt, though well he knows to halt is to die.

Staringly his eyes roam round him, agony pictured on his face, and horror in his heart, and then, as he feels that icy touch of Death—ah, so much colder than the ice and snow!—creeping over him, to freeze his life-blood, from his lips breaks forth a cry hardly human, and his aching eyes fall upon a thin column of blue smoke curling upward from the mountain side.

There is hope before him now, and, thrilled through and through with the electric thought, again he staggers forward.

It may be that Indians have made that fire, and he will fall into their hands; but, what cares he for that?

They are in his own image, and, though savage children of the forest, cannot be more cruel than the pitiless snow. With nerved heart and body he totters on, climbing the steep mountain side, panting, cursing, praying, all in a breath, his straining vision fixed upon that vapory column.

Upward and onward he climbs, into a pine thicket, then up a craggy wall, to slip back again and again, as the snow loosens beneath his feet; but, again and again he strives, clinging with his teeth to

the bare bushes, and with his fingers to the rocks, until the nails are torn to the quick, and the snow is dyed crimson with his blood.

But, he is struggling for life. It is a fierce, mad combat of Life against Death, and the former wins, for he reaches a small shelf, or plateau, from which he looks into a cavern.

There he stops, for a strange scene is before him, and he almost recoils with horror.

Before him is a cavern of large dimensions, and against the further wall is a fire, from which the smoke curls upward from an aperture in the rocky roof.

In front of that fire crouches, rather than kneels, a man, and yet one who seems hardly human, for his long white hair and beard reach to his waist and he is clad in the skin of a wild beast, which adds to his huge stature, giving him the appearance almost of a giant.

Before him, on each side of him, and around him, are heaps of shining metal:

"The dross that rules men's souls."

And as the man without, shivering, freezing, trembling with unspeakable emotion, looks upon the man within, groveling, whining, muttering, there come to his ears the wild words of the madman, for such he seems:

"Gold, beautiful, brilliant gold! How you glitter in my very heart, and add luster to my life!"

"Ha! ha! ha! I have you now in my iron clutch! After years of waiting I have you here, to love, to cherish as I please! You, my idol, how I love you! how I have sinned for you—yes, lied for you, and killed for you; but you can buy me absolution, buy my soul from the devil and make me honored among men."

"And you shall, for I have the wealth of a king here, and when I am gone the Madman's mountain may crumble to decay for all I care— Ha!"

He turned fiercely around, for a groan of pain had broken from the freezing man without.

With the cry of a wild beast he was upon his feet, and brandishing a long knife he rushed upon the one who had dared intrude into his golden domain.

But, the love of life still clung in the half-stilled heart, and with a mighty effort the despairing, freezing man drew from his belt a revolver, leveled it and fired.

At his very feet fell the gold-crazed madman, a half-attempt to rise, a curse, a groan and his face lay motionless upon the rocky flooring.

Tottering across the hairy form, the pistol dropping from his nerveless hand, the poor, frozen, starving creature sunk down unconscious in front of the blazing fire; whether dead or alive the sequel will show.

CHAPTER I.

THE PONY EXPRESS RIDER'S TIDINGS.

THE mining hamlet, rejoicing under the euphonious title of Good Man's Gulch, was all excitement, for the overland mail-coach was an hour behind time, and the Pony Express Rider was nearly half that time late, a thing without precedent with that dashing horseman and tireless skimmer over mountain and plain.

A crowd of miners, traders' and loafers in general had assembled in front of the principal hotel, known as the Traveler's Refuge, and were anxiously gazing up the valley road, or discussing the various causes that might have detained the stage and Express Rider.

"I tell yer, pards, ther has been some devil's game played on 'em, for Hank Holbrook hain't no man to lag on the road," said a burly, heavily-bearded miner.

"And ef accident did detain him, what hev be come of ther Pony Prince?" said another.

"That's so, pard, for this is ther day for ther two Princes ter roll in, and they didn't gain ther names o' Prince of ther Ribbons, and Prince of Pony Riders to lose 'em without some cause. You hear me chin, ther's a b'ilin' o' some kind up yonder in the mountains, and I, for one, am willing to saddle up and diskiver ther cause."

"I'm with yer, Lasso Dan," cried a tall, fine-looking fellow, whose great strength had won for him the appellation of Steel Grip.

"And I are yer butterfly."

"I'll not lose ther shindig."

"Count me in," and so on, called out volunteers, until it was evident that a large force would take the road to discover the cause of delay in the coach and Express Rider.

But, ere the crowd could disperse to get their horses, a shout went up from several who were watching the road, as it wound far up the mountain-side, and a cheer burst from a hundred throats as a dark object suddenly shot into view.

"It's ther Pony Prince!" yelled a voice, and every eye was turned upon the road, two miles away, where it came out of the dark recesses of the mountain.

Like the very wind he came on; a horseman, sitting well back in the saddle, his reins grasped firmly, and his steed with neck outstretched, reeking sides, and ears laid back, running like a mad racer.

Down the winding road he came, with mighty bounds, now disappearing in a grove of pines, to reappear a moment after at the same break-neck speed; now lost to view, as the trail wound through a canyon, and again dashing before the eyes of the watchers to keep up the same wild pace as he thundered down the steep valley highway.

A plunge at the creek, a struggle through the rushing waters, and again the gallant steed was stretching every nerve as he rushed up the hill leading to the town, and the next moment, amid deafening cheers, halted in front of the hotel, swayed wildly, reared, and fell dead, his nimble rider barely having time to save himself from being pinned under him.

"Yer've rid him ter death, Bill," cried Lasso Dan, in a reproachful tone, for, though he would fight a grizzly, he had the heart of a dove.

"Yes, with the aid of two bullets in his body to drag his noble life out," was the quiet rejoinder of the man, whose daring and desperate rides, alone over mountain and plain, had gained for him the proud title of the Pony Prince—the fastest, wildest, and most reckless of all the Pony Express Riders.

Though scarcely over twenty-two, he was a man of splendid physical development, tall, erect as an Indian, and with every movement denoting strength

and activity in an uncommon degree, and a hand some, fearless, hail-fellow-well-met, he was the idol of the rough spirits at Good Man's Gulch.

Lashing his top-boots with his gold-mounted whip, and throwing back his wealth of long, dark-brown hair, the Pony Rider stooped and patted his dead horse affectionately, and removing the express-bag from his saddle, walked into the office, which was next door to the hotel, nodding right and left to those who greeted him.

"I say, Bill, you're as silent as a ghost about yer being late. Come in an' let me cure that case o' lockjaw with a little benzine, and then we'll learn what's ther row back on the road," said Lasso Dan, as the Pony Prince came out of the express-office.

"There has been trouble, pards, but the fun is all over now, except the preaching to be done at the funeral."

"Then there has been a b'ilin'" and the crowd gathered closer around the man whom they knew had just passed through some great danger.

"Don't chew yer cud like a cow, Bill, but spit it out," cried one, and with a light laugh the Pony Rider answered:

"Well, in a word, when I rode into Specter Canyon, I came upon the stage-coach with its leaders dead, Hank Holbrook wounded and tied, and several stiffs lying round, and I knew there had been trouble."

"The road-agents!" cried a score of voices.

"Yes, under their leader, the Black Captain, they had halted the stage, and robbed the passengers, one of whom, an army sutler, they had killed, besides wounding Hank, because he attempted to drive over them."

"Bully for the Prince of the Ribbons!" "Hank's clear grit, you bet," and other expressions of admiration went up from the crowd, while another, Steel Grip, called out:

"Come, pards, let us go to their rescue."

"No; there is no need of that, for yonder comes the coach now, and I tell you the agents got a full dose of pistol chops."

"Hoorah for Hank!"

"But it was not Hank who did it, but one other who came upon the scene just after the agents halted the old hearse, and if you never saw a man, why then you'll see one when the stage comes, for he's on the box now, holding the ribbons," and all eyes were turned upon the stage-coach, which, with only four horses, was coming at a sweeping pace down the mountain road.

"Who ar' this fellow, Bill?" asked one.

"I'll never tell you, for I don't know; but I tell you he's every inch a man, for he was riding alone over the mountain, came upon the agents at their devilish work, and went right at them, a revolver in each hand, and making every shot tell."

"They say the agents played their weapons lively and tried to check him, but it wasn't any use, for he rode some down, popped others over, and the rest scattered, and the Dashing Dandy, as Hank called him, came up smiling and seemed pleased with the entertainment."

"And you don't know him?"

"No, never saw him before, but hope to again, for he's my style, and I told him so."

"Well, when I came upon the scene, there was nothing left for me to do but to count the stiffs, and leave the handsome fellow to bring the coach on, and he has done it, I see, though the agents gave me a racket as I came by the Hangman's Tree, and doubtless saluted the old hearse, too; but here she rolls, right side up," and the next moment, with a skill that Hank Holbrook could not excel, the overland mail rattled up to the front of the Traveler's Refuge, the horses brought to a sudden halt, in spite of their fright at the dead steed of the Pony Express Rider.

At a glance it was evident that the stage had passed through a severe ordeal, for one of the horses was bleeding from a wound in his neck, and the splintered sides of the coach proved that the bullets had flown thick around it, while, strapped on top, was a ghastly load—half a dozen of dead forms.

But every eye was turned upon the driver, who sprung nimbly to the ground, and seeing the Pony Prince said, with a smile:

"I am glad you got through all right, for we heard those devils open on you, and they also gave us a volley. Come, let us go in and have a drink, for the landlord will look after the passengers and my horse," and he glanced at a superb black steed that had trotted, like a faithful hound, behind the coach.

"I will join you with pleasure; but, is Hank much hurt?" asked Bill Cody.

"If you mean the driver, no; a flesh-wound in his arm and another in his head. He'll come round all right in a few days, and the stranger led the way into the hotel bar, while Lasso Dan remarked:

"He do look like a dandy, and he's got ther devil in him too, I'm thinking."

"He'll not be long here afore he's tried on, pard," remarked another, and all eyes, as though fascinated, followed the handsome stranger until he disappeared from sight, accompanied by the Pony Prince.

And handsome he certainly was, for his face would have been effeminate in its beauty had it not been for a certain stern look upon the mouth, and fiery brightness of the eyes, which, at times, seemed full of brooding sadness.

Darkly bronzed by exposure, and apparently one who had seen the rough side of life in its worst phases, he was dressed like an exquisite, wearing a blue velvet short coat, black pants stuck in embroidered top boots, a ruffled-bosom shirt, and a slouch-hat, black, with large brim, and a gold cord encircling it.

A belt was around his waist, and a gold buckle was visible, but his arms were concealed beneath his loose sack-coat, unless the pair of ivory-handled revolvers, which all had noticed in holsters on his elegant Mexican saddle, were all that he carried.

In his shirt front a diamond of immense size and great brilliancy was visible, while, as he removed his buckskin gauntlets at the bar, its mate was noticeable upon the little finger of his left hand.

Six feet in height, superbly dressed, and with his dark hair hanging below his shoulders, he was a man to attract attention in any assemblage, and especially in that wild border settlement.

Just as the Pony Rider and the stranger raised their glasses of brandy to their lips, the eyes of the latter suddenly saw in the large mirror in front of

him, a pair of glaring eyes peering into his own, and a hand rapidly seeking for a weapon.

There was no time to turn, for the huge bully was almost upon him, but with a motion as quick as a flash of light, his left hand was thrust under his coat, a revolver was leveled over his shoulder, with only the mirror to aim from, and two pistols flashed almost together, but the stranger's a second the quickest.

There was a jingling of broken glass and a heavy fall commingling, and English Bill, one of the worst devils in Good Man's Gulch, sunk heavily upon the floor, while the man who had fired the fatal shot deliberately dashed off his glass of liquor and said, without the slightest trace of emotion, addressing the barkeeper:

"That shot was aimed at me. What do I owe for the glass?"

"Not a durned cent, pard; ef you do, I are a liar, for it are worth the glass ter see yer shoot as yer did. Come, liquor up with me, and then I'll h'list English Bill inter ther street for ther coroner to sit on; but, durned ef you hain't chain-lightning. Come up, pard, all; it are my treat."

As the crowd pressed forward at the invitation of Wild Fred, the bartender, English Bill suddenly half-raised himself from the floor and tried to level his pistol; but the effort was fruitless, as his strength was gone, and he said, faintly:

"Curse you, Iron Heart, yer've got me at last."

"I told you I would kill you, and I have kept my word," and taking his second drink and bowing politely to the crowd, he walked into the hotel office, just as English Bill fell back dead.

Going up to the register he wrote in a large, bold hand:

"IRON HEART—THE KING OF FATE."

The clerk glanced at him with surprise, and called a servant to show him to a room, the best in the hotel, while a crowd gathered around the book to have a look at the name of the handsome stranger, and Lasso Dan exclaimed:

"Waal, I declar', pard, I hain't up in th'ologies to tell yer who the King o' Fate mout be or mout not be, but I sw'ar I sp'cted ter see him sling ink to ther name o' Satan from hell; I did fer a fact, but fer all that he's no pard o' Satan—bet yer bottom dollar on that! An' ef he's Iron Heart to such as that ar' carcuss than"—pointing to the dead ruffian—"he's the Dashin' Dandy o' these Hills that it'll do to freeze to: them's my sentiments."

"And a pard to be proud of," added Bill Cody, with flashing eyes that told of the heart-partnership he had already formed for the strange man.

CHAPTER II.

"THE SATAN'S DOMINION."

THE excitement of the day, occasioned by the attack on the stage-coach and the Pony Express Rider, caused a large assemblage to gather at the gaming-saloon known as "Satan's Dominion," the popular resort of Good Man's Gulch, and the scene of more desperate encounters, ruined fortunes and hard drinking than any place in the Western country.

Another cause that made many attend was a desire to see the remarkable man who had, single-handed, rescued the stage from a dozen mountain road-agents under their desperate chief, Black Captain, so called from the fact that he always dressed in deepest black, and had his face wholly concealed beneath a mask painted to resemble a skull, his gloves being also streaked so as to have the appearance of skeleton hands.

For a couple of years the Black Captain had been the terror of the mining regions, never remaining long in one neighborhood, and with his daring band had eluded all attempts at capture.

A month before the attack on the stage-coach he had taken possession of the mountain road leading to the various towns and camps along the valleys and in the hills, and the Good Man's Gulch people now expected to hear from him often, in a way that they did not like, while the bravest of them did not care to be in the place of Hank Holbrook, Bob Beckett and other drivers over the lonely trail.

It was, therefore, that the affairs might be talked over, that such a large crowd went to the Satan's Dominion as soon as darkness came on, and by nine o'clock the large saloon was full of as wild a set as could possibly be gathered under one roof, and a stranger glancing into the place could not have failed to observe that the name it bore had been properly bestowed.

In the main entrance was the bar, running the full length of the hall, and having behind it half a dozen dispensers of fluids ardent, from New England rum to French brandy.

This hall, or saloon, was about seventy-five feet long and forty in width, and at the further end, upon either side, double doors led into large rooms, one of which was devoted to faro and roulette and the other to tables for card-playing.

A little after nine a tall, well-formed man entered the saloon, and walking to a table at the end of the bar took a seat and called for a glass of brandy.

At his entrance a momentary hush fell upon the crowd, although they had seen him there hundreds of times before; but there was a certain devilish fascination in his looks that few could resist, and along the whole valley he was known as the most dangerous man on the border.

An exquisite in dress, sparkling with diamonds, as he sat there stroking his long blonde beard, and occasionally shaking his head to throw back the curls that fell upon his shoulders, the motion reminding one of a lion throwing back his mane, he did not look the desperate character he was painted; but one glance into his bright black eyes and there the devil in his nature was visible, for they were cruel, merciless and never at rest.

A year before Colonel Dick Burton, as he had called himself, and "Colonel Dick," and "Devil Dick," as the miners had nicknamed him, came to Good Man's Gulch, and expressing his determination to make it his home, he had purchased the Satan's Dominion saloon, refitted it in elegant style, and become its proprietor, though he never appeared to attend to any of its business details, and was only seen there at night, and then only to get into a game of cards with some of his patrons, in which game he almost invariably came out the winner.

Several times he had interfered in difficulties occurring there, and always came off victor, while, in attacks that had been made upon him by desperadoes who did not know his caliber, he had proven himself a man to be feared and severely let alone.

Hardly had the "Colonel" taken a seat at the private table, and begun to look over a paper, wholly indifferent to the scene around him, when the door opened and in came three objects of general conversation—none other than Bill Cody, the "Pony Prince,"* Hank Holbrook, the "Ribbon Prince," whose wounds did not trouble him much, and the man who had registered as "Iron Heart, The King of Fate."

Their appearance was greeted with a cheer, and Colonel Dick, glancing up and seeing them, arose and advanced quickly, while he said:

"Allow me, Cody, to congratulate you, and you, also, Holbrook, upon your escape to-day. Present me to your friend, and join me at my table in a drink."

As he spoke, Iron Heart looked him straight in the face, and there were those present who swore that those two men had met before, and that the colonel's face turned pale, while Iron Heart smiled sweetly; but no outward sign of recognition transpired between them, and Hank Holbrook said:

"I'll introduce yer with pleasure, Colonel Dick, to one o' ther whitest men as ever drew a wepon; I refers to my pard for life, Iron Heart, Captain Dashi'n' Dandy, as will christen him, for he needs a livelier handle to his cognomen than such as Iron Heart; he's got a iron hand and steel nerve, but his heart is jest pure gold, or call me a liar; so, pard, this are Colonel Dick Burton, or Colonel Dick, or Devil Dick, just as yer please to call him, an' he are the boss o' this shebang, and a pluckier devil don't live."

The two men bowed at this rather strange introduction, and motioning his guests to seats at his table, the colonel called for drinks, Dashing Dandy glancing around the room as unconcernedly as though a hundred eyes were not upon him, admiring his handsome, beardless face, and splendid physique.

"What in thunder's up, now?" suddenly cried Hank Holbrook, as a crowd came into the door, and in their midst an Indian securely bound, and a young girl.

"It is Gray Eagle, the Cheyenne Chief, and Firefly," responded the Pony Prince, and then he added: "what can be the matter?"

Coming forward, the four men who had the Indian in charge stopped at the colonel's table, and one of them, known as Powder-Face Jack, from the fact that his face was filled with burnt powder-marks, said, loudly:

"Colonel, I've got a leetle affair on hand I want you ter settle, and ther pleaders in ther case is a Ingin and a gal."

"Well, what is it, Jack?" asked Colonel Dick, quietly.

"Yer see, sir, this Ingin are no good, and he goes cavortin' round the country and has struck ther trail o' a rich lead somewhere, and tellin' me about it, I played him a game o' keerdys for the information, ag'in a hundred dollars, and I won, fa'r an' squar'."

"Pale-face cheat; have plenty card in pocket; Indian no able to white man's heart," retorted the chief, with dignity.

"He are a howlin' liar, Devil Dick—I begs yer pardon, I means Colonel Dick; I are truth in gilt-edge binding and gold clasps; I won ther information, and when ther red wouldn't tell me, why I an' my pard here jist lit right on top o' him, and we was goin' ter fry him an' hev him for dinner, but this pesky gal come along an' we let up."

"You were right to oblige the lady, Jack."

"The infamous coward had to oblige me, for I had a revolver at his head," came in a contemptuous tone from the girl, and drew the eyes of Iron Heart upon her, causing him to start with surprise at the vision of beauty he beheld.

Young, scarcely eighteen, with every feature exquisitely molded, large, lustrous blue eyes, a wealth of red-gold hair, and a slender, graceful form, dressed in a fancy *vivandière* costume that was most becoming, and wearing a slouch hat with gold cord and feather, she was one to attract the admiration of the most indifferent to feminine beauty.

In her belt she wore two gold-mounted revolvers, and a pearl-handled knife, while at her back was slung a small rifle, and her fearless, determined face proved that she would use the weapons if need be.

"Well, Jack, I don't see how you can settle it, when Firefly is against you," the colonel declared.

"Let me explain, sir: the chief there was the friend of my father years ago, and he has ever been my friend, and finding those men trying to torture from him a knowledge of some mine he says he knows of in the mountains, I demanded his release, and finding that I could not gain it otherwise I bought his freedom," explained the maiden.

"And what price did you give, may I ask?"

"Myself!"

Every one started with surprise; and no wonder, for Firefly was loved by nearly every miner in and around Good Man's Gulch, and had refused scores of suitors; but now she frankly admitted that she had offered to give herself to Powder-Face Jack for the freedom of the Indian, Gray Eagle.

"It's true, Colonel Dick; I loves the gal, as I guesses you and the other galoots here does, too, and I told her I'd let the red go ef she'd promise to be my wife, and she said she would, but now she wants to put it off for a week, and hev me let ther red skin go, too, but I hain't a durned fool, ef I does look it."

"Well, Jack, what will you take for your bargain?" suddenly asked the colonel, and he looked straight into the face of Firefly, who quickly glanced down.

"As husband's go, I guesses it is from ther fryin' pan inter ther fire, colonel, ef you gits ther gal; but I holds her costly, I does."

"Say five thousand dollars, cash."

"For the Ingin and the gal, too!"

"Yes, for the release of the Indian and for Firefly; but first, let me ask her if she meant to bargain her self off for the freedom of the chief?"

"Yes; he twice saved my father's life, and mine he has saved a score of times. I promised that scoundrel to marry him if he would let the Indian

* Since known the world over as Buffalo Bill, the famous scout, guide and hunter.

go, and I therefore belong to him, only I wish a week's time."

"An' she an' ther red would skip ter Washington an' be married by ther President. No, she don't play no Pocahontas joke on this innocent child," and Powder-Face Jack gave her a vicious look.

"Well, will you take six thousand for the girl?"

"No, colonel; but ef yer loves her enough to risk ten thousan' on her, she's yours, an' I'll gi'n yer my blessin', too."

"Done! Collins, pay this man ten thousand dollars for me," and the colonel turned to his manager behind the bar.

"Now, Firefly, this is my proposal to you. One week from to-day come to my home—you know where I live on the hill—and I will have there a missionary, now preaching in the mines, and he will make you my wife, for you belong to me now."

"And the chief?" asked the girl, as pale as death, and almost in a whisper.

"He shall be set free as soon as the matrimonial knot is tied, and I may as well tell you, if you do not come on that day, why then—I shall kill him."

All started at the words of the colonel, and Firefly's eyes blazed as she turned them upon the man before her, and then looked toward the calm, immovable Indian; but she said in a distinct tone:

"I will be there, Devil Dick."

The colonel half rose from his chair, his eyes burning, but he sunk back with a light laugh, while he said:

"You know the alternative if you are not. Rodney, put that Indian in safe keeping until I want him, and if he escapes there will be a death in your family."

"Hold! one moment, please," and the deep tones of Iron Heart broke the spell that seemed to rest upon all present, for every game had ceased, not a drink had been called for, and over a hundred men had gathered around and watched the strange scene at the colonel's table.

When Dashing Dandy's deep voice interfered, all held their breath and waited the result, as he arose to his feet.

"Well, sir, how can I serve *you*?" asked the colonel, with a strange emphasis upon the word *you*.

"Will you dispose of your purchase at double the amount you paid for it?" was the quiet response of Iron Heart.

"No, sir; I did not buy to sell," and the colonel smiled.

"I will double my offer, sir."

"And I refuse it."

"Then it is useless to offer any price?"

"Wholly useless."

All eyes now turned upon the strange man who signed himself the "King of Fate."

What motive had he for offering such an enormous sum for a girl whom he had never seen before, or, if he had, both he and Firefly were acting splendidly, for the maiden stood with clasped hands gazing upon him, and it was evident that she would gladly see the exchange made.

As cool as though conversing upon an ordinary topic stood Dashing Dandy, and in the calmest tones he said:

"You are a gambler, I believe?"

The colonel's face flushed, but he quietly returned:

"Such is my profession, sir."

"Then, sir, I challenge you to play me a game of cards for the possession of the girl."

The sudden proposition astounded all, but some quickly called out:

"That's squar', colonel!"

"You can't crawfish out o' that, Colonel Dick."

"There's no backin' down in the colonel," and numerous other expressions, until it was evident that there was but one thing for the proprietor of Satan's Dominion to do, if he wished to keep his hold upon that rough crowd.

With one sweep of his restless eyes he saw that the stranger held the vantage, and he remarked, in the blandest tones:

"I have frequently said, sir, that as a gambler I would play for any stake put up, and I do not eat my words now."

"Hoorah for the colonel!" cried several voices, but without noticing it, he continued:

"But there is one drawback."

"Name it, sir," said Dashing Dandy, with unmistakable decision.

"I consider Firefly a pearl beyond price, and there is no stake that can be put up against her."

"Perhaps you are mistaken, for I will put up a stake that may make it more interesting to play for than any amount of money."

"Indeed! you surprise me, for my most vivid imagination cannot picture what you mean," said the colonel, sneeringly.

Without the slightest sign of emotion, and with a silence like death in the room, Iron Heart said, slowly:

"I will explain, sir. I will play you one game of cards, or best two in three games, for that maiden, *against my own life*."

A wild burst of applause came from the crowd of miners at this reckless, daring offer, and Firefly clasped her hands and gazed upon the man who had offered such a stake with a surprise and regret that were depicted upon every feature.

Almost instantly the noise subsided in the room, and Firefly springing forward grasped the hand of Dashing Dandy, while she cried:

"Oh, no! no! no! do not make such an offer; leave me to my fate, for life has little pleasure for me anyhow, and it matters not what becomes of me."

"I never retract my words. I weigh them before utterance, and repeat my offer," was the calm rejoinder of the mysterious champion, and he turned his eyes upon Colonel Burton.

"If you lose he'll take your life; I know the man; but if you stick to it, remember I am your friend and pard to the bitter end," said Bill Cody, the Pony Prince.

"And me, too; jest count me in," whispered Hank Holbrook.

"I'm with yer, pard, and so is Lasso Dan," added Steel Grip in the ear of the Pony Prince.

But, unheeding these expressions of friendship, even if he heard them, Dashing Dandy looked the colonel in the face and waited for a reply.

Dashing Dandy.

It came, after what seemed a long silence: "You certainly offer odds for the girl, sir, and, as a gambler who would play his own soul away, if the stakes were large enough, I can but accept your proposition. A fresh pack of cards here, Rodney."

Another wild yell greeted the colonel's words, and then the deep voice of Iron Heart was again heard:

"Pardon me, but do those cards come out of your own supply?"

"They do, sir; why?"

"Then I must ask some disinterested gentleman to lend us a pack, for I will not trust my life with your cards."

"What! Do you dare to insinuate, sir, that I would cheat?" and the colonel's eyes fairly blazed.

"A guilty conscience needs no accuser, Colonel Burton. Take my words as you please, but let us use another pack of cards all the same."

A laugh followed, and with renewed interest all looked on; many expecting to see the colonel spring to his feet and draw a revolver; but, there was something in the calm, really indifferent manner of the man before him that prevented an outbreak, and he replied:

"Use what cards you please; I can afford to wait."

"I have a pack here that have never been used; they are at your service," and the Pony Prince threw the cards upon the table.

"There will do. Now, Mr. Rodney, let the gentlemen have what drinks they desire," and Dashing Dandy arose and approached the bar.

A general drink to his health all round, in which the colonel joined, and Iron Heart turned to Firefly:

"Come; be seated between us, for you have doubtless some little interest in this game."

She tried to smile and sunk down in the chair he offered her, and watched him attentively as he unbuckled his belt, worn beneath his velvet coat, and handed it to the Pony Prince.

It contained two large pearl-handled and gold-mounted revolvers, and a knife of the same style of mounting and exquisite workmanship; beautiful weapons to be so deadly.

"Mr. Cody, will you keep these, that the colonel may see that I mean no foul play, and am at his mercy, should he win?" and Dashing Dandy smiled, as the Pony Prince took the belt of arms, but inwardly vowed they would not be far away if needed by their owner.

The scene now culminated in the deepest interest, and that wild, reckless crowd was as quiet as though in church, while their eager eyes watched every motion of the colonel and the remarkable man who had so desperately put his life against the turn of a card.

That he had somewhere met the colonel before, all believed, and that he was playing a deeper game than appeared on the surface, all were convinced, and the more so, when he said in a tone, tinged with sarcasm:

"Now, Devil Dick, I am ready for the game: *my life against Firefly.*"

CHAPTER III.

THE GAME FOR LIFE.

TAKING up the cards as though for a game that held no interest other than a few dollars at stake, Iron Heart shuffled them thoroughly, the colonel "cut" and the hands were dealt out, the two players, with such perfect control over themselves, showing more nonchalance through the game than did the lookers-on, especially Firefly, who was as pale as death.

"Will you smoke, sir?" asked the colonel, as the game progressed.

"Thank you, yes," and Dashing Dandy lit his cigar and went on with the utmost indifference.

It was to be the best two in three games, and, as all had expected, for they knew his prowess with cards, Colonel Burton won the first game.

But, he showed no elation over the result, nor did Iron Heart exhibit any annoyance, though Firefly breathed hard and her eyes were fixed upon the cards with a stare that was painful.

With steady hand the colonel dealt the cards and the second game was played and won by his opponent.

Again did neither player show any sign of either joy or vexation, and Firefly's face brightened.

"Will you drink, sir?" asked the colonel, politely.

"Thank you, no!" was the quiet reply.

"Brandy for me, here," called out the colonel, and he poured out a tumbler half full and raised it to his lips with steady nerve.

Now all was the intensest excitement around the table, though suppressed, for every one kept as silent as the grave, and they knew that the third game decided whether the colonel should still possess Firefly and also have the power to take the life of Iron Heart.

Trembling like a leaf shaken by the wind sat Firefly, and yet, why she was so deeply moved she could not explain to herself; for only a short while ago she had been almost indifferent as to whether she was left to the possession of Powder-Face Jack or Colonel Burton; but now it seemed different to her, for a man was playing *his life* for her—a man whom she had never before seen, and whose desperate risk for her sake she could not understand any more than could the Pony Prince and the others in the saloon.

A few more cards were thrown down, and then Iron Heart said, without the slightest exultation in his tone:

"*C'mon, I have won!*"

Wild yells went up from the crowd, and rising, Dashing Dandy motioned for all present to join him in a drink.

"We'll do it, for you is a screamer from Screamer-ville an' no mistake," cried one.

"Colonel Dick, yer'll have ter hang yer head," suggested another, and they ranged themselves along in line, with a precision and alacrity that proved long practice in just such maneuvers.

"You have won, sir; the girl belongs to you," said the colonel, and if annoyed he did not show it.

"And the Indian, sir?"

"There was nothing said about the red-skin, sir."

"Nor was there in your bargain with that ruffian," and the winner pointed to Powder-Face Jack.

"Say, pard, does yer call *me* a ruffian?" and the desperado turned quickly upon the man whom he felt had insulted him.

"Your gaining possession of this girl as you did, proves you even worse," was the contemptuous reply.

Powder-Face Jack was a quick man "on the draw," but he had scarcely made a motion toward his revolver, when with the spring of a tiger the lion-hearted man was upon him, his hand in his powerful grasp, and a clutch of iron upon the bully's throat.

Then, with a strength that seemed supernatural, he bent the desperado backward until he shrieked with pain, and, by a mighty effort hurled him across the room.

Turning, as though considering the bully no longer to be dreaded, he again approached Colonel Dick Burton, with:

"Well, sir, what about the Indian?"

"Do you wish to play for him?"

"No; I wish you to release him."

"And if I decline?"

All were now again interested deeply, and awaited the answer; it came promptly.

"Then Colonel Dick Burton and myself will have to quarrel."

"Do I understand this as a threat?"

"As you please, sir."

"I say, colonel, as the trouble was about the Indian, and Firefly sold herself for his freedom, it is but fair I think that he should go free," put in the Pony Prince.

"What business is it of yours, Cody?" asked the colonel, quickly.

"None, except I always have a habit of chipping in when I intend to see fair play done," and Bill's eyes gleamed ominously.

For the first time in his life Colonel Dick Burton felt that he could not force a quarrel to its alternative, and he determined to "take water," as gracefully as possible; not that he had any personal fear, for that did not seem to be in the man's composition; but he felt that he was in the wrong, and to further his ends in the future, he would recede as gracefully as possible, so he said, blandly:

"My dear Cody, I have not said that I intended keeping the Indian; I intended holding him as a hostage to bring Firefly to terms, but he is now free to go, and I'll throw him in with the girl. Come, gentlemen, it is my treat; what will you have?"

Again all ranged up to the bar, all except Powder-Face, who had skulked from the room.

"To our better acquaintance, sir, and allow me to suggest, Captain Iron Heart, that you watch that man Powder-Face. None worse are on the border."

"Thank you, Colonel Burton; the rule of my life is never to be taken off my guard," and calling to Firefly and the Indian to follow him, and accompanied by the Pony Prince and Hank Holbrook, Dashing Dandy left the saloon.

"Now, my girl, tell me where you live and I will see you to your home, for you should not be out alone," said her preserver, as they left the Satan's Dominion.

"Oh, sir, I am always alone, and have no fear; besides, the chief here, has his wigwam on my ranch; but I have so much to thank you for."

"Oh, no, I was determined not to see you imposed on, or to let that devil treat the chief, and if ever you need a friend call on me; I will be at the Traveller's Refuge. My name I believe you know; good-night!" and turning away, Iron Heart joined the Pony Prince and Hank Holbrook, who had walked some paces away, while Firefly and the Indian moved slowly off in another direction.

"Cody, who is that girl?" asked his strange pard, as he joined his two new-found friends.

"Her parents settled here among the very first comers, some years ago; but they were attacked, when the Indians raided on the valley, five years since, and her father and mother were slain, and her brother, too, at least he's never been heard from.

"Firefly, as the boys call her, though her real name is Ida Lennox, lives on the ranch with two old negroes, a man and woman, who belong to her, for they came from the South somewhere. The girl rides like an Indian, is a crack shot with both revolver and rifle, and several times has left her mark on ruffians who insulted her, for she goes anywhere and everywhere alone."

"And the ranch supports her?"

"Oh, yes, for she owns a number of cattle. Well, here we are at the hotel, and I must retire, for I start out early in the morning as express. Will you drive to-morrow, Hank?"

"Guess I'll lay off for a day or two, as my arm is a leetle stiff, and Jim Bedloe can take the ribbons in my stead. Going ter remain here long, captain?" and Hank turned to Dashing Dandy.

"Yes, I have come here for a certain purpose, and I intend to accomplish it."

"Better be a leetle careful, fer you is going it pretty reckless, an' yer checks mout be called in, for luck hain't allers goin' ter stick ter a man, no matter how brave he is; so drive slow, pard."

The other smiled pleasantly, and remarked, as he pointed to his name, for they stood at the hotel counter:

"Do you see what I have written there?"

"Yas; 'King o' Fate.'"

"Well, I'll be King of Fate until I accomplish my end in coming here. By the way, I may need the services of two good men while here; can you recommend any one?"

"I'm ther boy as kin, an' I shout out Lasso Dan and Steel Grip; they is fine fellows, game as a grizzly, but luck has gone a leetle hard with 'em o' late; I'll send 'em to yer in the morning."

"Thank you; good-night," and Dashing Dandy went to his room, leaving Hank and the Pony Prince to discuss, over a "night-cap," the merits of the remarkable man they had that day met for the first time.

CHAPTER IV.

FOLLOWING A DEAD MAN'S TRAIL.

THE day following the attack on the stage-coach a horseman rode slowly out of Good Man's Gulch, and turning in a broad trail leading down the valley,

urged his horse into a sweeping gallop.

For several miles he kept this gait, his splendid black horse showing no signs of fatigue, and then he turned abruptly to the right, into a canyon that ran into the mountain range.

Far behind him he had left the mining camps, and

also the home of the last *ranchero*, and around him was solitude and lack of habitation; but, as though acquainted with the country, he wound on through the different canyons until he came out into the valley beyond, and almost at the base of a high and solitary hill that was known as Malman's Mountain, for there were strange stories told of it, by those who had gone in the vicinity, and it was said that it was the home of a giant madman, or ghost, half human, half beast, and even the Indians gave the spot a wide berth, and shunned it as the abode of the Evil Spirit.

But, as though not knowing of these superstitious stories regarding the Madman's Mountain, or, if knowing them, utterly disregarding their truth, the horseman kept on around the base of the hill until he came to a shallow stream leading across the trail.

Into this he turned, and the noble animal climbed the mountain by the bed of the stream until a grand view of the valley below and country around was visible.

Here the horseman paused, dismounted, and leading his steed into a pine thicket, took off the saddle and bridle and left the animal to graze upon the rich grass, while he penetrated among the rocks and canyons that broke the mountain's sides.

"So far, good; now to study the map," he muttered, and taking a large roll of paper from his pocket he spread it before him upon a rock and carefully glanced over it.

There were two points of departure from which to start, marked on the map as "Good Man's Gulch," and "Indian Camp," and, from there, trails, marked by lines, ran toward a given center, which was Madman's Mountain.

Then a trail up the mountain was drawn, which was the one followed so closely by the horseman.

Tacked to the map was a smaller one of the mountain itself, with directions written beneath, and after studying them closely the horseman arose and slowly followed the marked trail.

A walk of ten minutes brought him to a craggy shelf, and upon it was a thick growth of underbrush.

Entering the thicket he came suddenly upon the opening to a large cavern.

Without hesitation he started to enter, when there came a terrific roar, a scratching sound upon the rocks, and he was confronted by a huge bear, the monarch of the mountain.

It was too late to retreat, and he had but one alternative, to stand and meet his savage foe.

In a twinkling he whipped out his revolver in his left hand and knife in his right, and with a shot and a blow the fierce combat began between man and beast.

But the perfect nerve and iron strength of the man saved him, and, unhurt himself, he laid the huge monster dead at his feet.

"I was nearly caught off my guard that time," he said, with a grim smile, as he threw another load into his pistol, wiped his knife on the hairy hide of the bear, and stepped across him into the cavern.

In a few moments his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, and he saw distinctly every object in the cavern.

"He did not deceive me in the least; there is a fortune here, and a princely one."

"And it is mine, too; but, what care I for riches, now that there is no one for me to share them with, and I have ample for all my wants, so I'll leave my inheritance until I have accomplished the purpose of my life; then it will be time enough for me to work this mine. Now to retrace my way by the dead man's trail back to Goodman's Gulch—Ah! there are the bones of the madman he killed, and they are scattered about among the lumps of gold he loved so well," and without another word he left the cavern, retraced his way to his horse, mounted, and was soon again in the valley.

As he was about to turn into the canyon, he heard the neigh of a horse, and out from a narrow gorge dashed a sted with a side-saddle on.

"Hal! there is mischief her!" and seizing the lasso that hung at his saddle-horn he threw it quickly and captured the runaway animal, and leading him, started in the direction from whence he had come.

A rapid ride of half a mile brought him into an open space, surrounded by overhanging hills, and on the other side, near the base of a large rock, he discovered a human form lying upon the ground.

The next moment he was bending over the Indian chief, Gray Eagle.

"Great Chief Iron Heart come see Eagle die," said the Indian, faintly, motioning to a wound in his side, from which the blood was oozing.

"I am afraid so, chief, for you have been hard hit; how did it happen?" asked Iron Heart.

"Me came with Firefly, show her gold mine me found," and he pointed to a little stream in which a few specimens of gold were visible, with here and there a "pocket" from which the precious metal had been taken.

"And the Firefly, where is she?" asked Iron Heart, in some alarm.

"Powder-Face got her; he kill Eagle, but Eagle no' afraid to die; go Happy Hunting Grounds.

"Firefly all right now, you know; she good girl; don't let bad pale-face have her."

"I'll pledge you my word they shall not go, and I will track them to the end of the earth if they harm one hair of her head," and Iron Heart sprung to his feet and began to search the ground for the trail of the men who had carried the maiden off, while, in a low, monotonous voice, the Indian commenced chanting his death-song.

"There were five in the party, chief, and they went toward the mountains," he said, again approaching the Indian; but there was no answer to his question, for the brave spirit of the noble red-skin had taken its flight to the happy hunting grounds of his people.</

Dashing Dandy.

mined to get a posse of good men and true, and follow the trail of Powder-Face and his gang.

As he turned into the broad trail leading on to the Gulch, he came suddenly upon two horsemen, one of whom appeared to be a mere youth, though his lip was shaded by a small dark mustache.

He was dressed in a handsome hunting-suit, top-boots and slouch hat, and sat his horse with an easy grace that proved he was a thorough horseman.

His face was one that would attract attention anywhere, not only on account of his good looks, but also from an expression of inexpressible sadness that dwelt upon it; but when Iron Heart appeared his eyes turned quickly, and his hand dropped upon his revolver in a manner that indicated fearlessness and courage sufficient to meet any danger.

His companion was a thorough borderman in looks, talk, and make-up, of buckskin hunting-shirt and leggings.

"Hold, gentlemen; I am no foe," said the solitary rider, as he beheld both men place themselves on their guard at sight of him.

"Glad to hear it, pard, for I hain't no stummick for fightin' just now, being as I'se awful famished; but our journey is near its termination," said the plainsman.

"Yes, Good Man's Gulch is but a few miles ahead of us."

"I am glad to hear it, sir; do you reside there?" asked the youth, politely.

Iron Heart gave him one long, searching look, and replied:

"Yes, at present; but I would not advise you to do so, as it is a rough place and has some hard citizens."

"So I have heard; but I came out here to seek one that I have sworn to find, and I believe he is in, or near, Good Man's Gulch."

The youth spoke with a sudden vehemence that showed some deep motive for carrying out his oath; but, as though to hide his feeling, he continued:

"I secured the services of Lem Brigham, here, as my guide, and I am anxious to secure quarters where I will be away from the public; can you suggest such a place?"

"I am almost a stranger in Gulch City myself, only having arrived yesterday, but at the hotel you can easily ascertain. Come, will you ride on more rapidly, or shall I have to leave you?"

"I never desert pleasant company," replied the youth, with a smile, and then they all dashed on at a rapid pace.

A mile before reaching Goodman's Gulch their companion said, drawing rein in front of a well-to-do ranch:

"For certain reasons I do not care to take this led horse into the Gulch, so will leave him here; ride on slowly and I will overtake you."

He wheeled into the road leading to the cabin, and haltered in front of the piazza, while one of the three persons seated there arose and greeted him.

"Glad to see you, Captain Iron Heart; you honor me, sir. Perhaps you do not remember me, but I was at the hotel when you drove the stage in yesterday, and at the Dominion last night. My name is Sam Wharton, sir, Judge Sam Wharton at your service. Now tell me what I can do for you, sir, and it will do me proud, sir; now what can I do for you?"

His visitor was almost tempted to tell him to stop talking, but knowing that all men have peculiarities of some kind, and that the failing of the judge was to talk incessantly, he merely said:

"I found this horse astray, and would ask you to keep him for me until I send for him."

"Willingly! with pleasure. Why, bless my honest soul, it is the steed ridden by that wild girl, Firefly. See, Mr. Vancourt, this horse belongs to that will-o'-the-wisp you admired so much; but, bless me again for an old fool, for I'm forgetful: Mr. Vancourt, allow me to present to you my friend, Captain Iron Heart, of whom we were speaking awhile since; captain, this is Mr. Arthur Vancourt, a cattle king, sir, as we call our large stock-owners out here, and he is half in love with my daughter there. Daughter, this is Captain Iron Heart, and captain, my daughter Alice, the joy of my life, sir."

While the judge was talking Iron Heart had given a searching glance at the occupants of the piazza, and observed in Mr. Arthur Vancourt, the cattle king, a very handsome man of thirty-five, with heavy side-whiskers and mustache, and short curling hair; he was well-dressed, had a dissipated look, and wore a great deal of jewelry.

With Alice Wharton he was more pleased; for she was a very lovely girl of nineteen, as fresh as a rose, graceful as a fawn, and her face was an index to a true character.

"I hope no harm has befallen poor Firefly, sir," she said, anxiously, addressing Iron Heart, who replied, shortly:

"I trust not; I thank you, Judge; and if you come to town drop in at the Traveler's Refuge."

"With pleasure, sir; but you will remain to supper, sir; of course you will."

"Thank you, not this evening," and bowing politely he wheeled his horse and dashed away, murmuring to himself:

That girl is too lovely a woman to marry that cattle king, for he has an evil face. Where have I seen that face before? It comes back to me like a troubled dream. Ah me, I wish I could recall where and when, for I am certain that Mr. Arthur Vancourt and myself have met before."

Riding at a sweeping gallop he overtook the youth, who gave his name as Leo West, and Lem Brigham, riding slowly along and evidently discussing about their new friend, for the guide said as he rode up:

"He's too dandified to be true grit."

Arriving at the Traveler's Refuge, Dashing Dandy introduced him to the proprietor, and asked a room that the youth might be put in a room next to him, mentally observing:

That youngster may want a friend before he gets out of this place, and if his looks don't belie his character he needs one."

"He shall have No. 2, cap'tain, right next to you, sir, for your word is law in this house, for business has increased tenfold since you came, and dozens of galoots dined here to-day hoping to catch a glimpse of the great Dashing Dandy—as every one of the boys will hev it yer handle. Come, you and your friends join me in a drink."

"Thank you, I never drink," said Leo West, quiet-

ly; but he added, with a smile: "Lem here does my drinking for me."

"I'm on it, clean through. I'm with yer, land-lord," and he asked, in a whisper: "Who are this fancy rooster?"

"Why, that is Dashing Dandy—otherwise Iron Heart, the King o' Fate," said Jim Smith, the landlord, proud of having such a guest.

"Ther blazes yer say! Why, he are a thunderbolt turned loose ter rampage on ther wicked! Oh, I've heerd of him, an' so has many more down whar I circulates. I say, pard, you'll forgive me, but I misjudged yer clean through, and I are a liar for it," and he grasped Iron Heart's hand; "but yer store clothes and b'il'd shirt took me aback; but I knows yer now, for I wa'n't far from Denver when yer stood off a hull crowd as picked yer up fer a galoot and dropped yer fer a tiger. Put it thar, pard, an' we'll git drunk together."

"Not now, thank you, Mr. Brigham, for I have work to do; but, here's your very good health," and emptying his glass Iron Heart sallied forth to hunt up Lasso Dan and Steel Grip, that some plan of action might be determined upon to get Firefly out of the power of the villains who had captured her.

CHAPTER V.

AT BAY.

WITHOUT much difficulty, for they had worked their leads down to bed-rock, Dashing Dandy found Lasso Dan and Steel Grip, and bade them come to his room in the hotel, which they did with alacrity.

"My men, you were recommended to me by both the Pony Prince and Hank Holbrook, as being two persons that I could depend upon, and your conduct last night proves to me that they were not mistaken, so will you enter into my service while I am here, and the pay shall be better than a bad lead."

"Durn ther pay; we'll serve yer 'cause we likes yer," answered Lasso Dan, bluntly. "You're the Hotspur fer us!"

"Well, the service I will need of you may not be child's play, for I have come here for a purpose that one day you shall know, and I wish you to aid me in secret; but first, let me tell you that Powder-Face Jack killed the Indian chief, Eagle, to-day, and carried off Firefly."

"Does yer mean it? Durn his ugly pictur'!" said Steel Grip.

"Yes," and in a few words Iron Heart made known all that had happened, and developed his plan of action, which was to take the trail of the kidnappers and follow them to their lair.

"Tain't no use, pard; he's done that for duckits, an' ther place ter look for ther gal is in ther house o' Colonel Dick Burton, for, ef he gi'n ten thousan' for her last night he'll do it ag'in to-night, you can gamble on it."

"You are right, Dan; then I will go at once to the house of the colonel, and—"

"Don't do it, pard! We'll fix a better plan; better take the bull by ther horns an' then we've got some chance o' gittin' hold o' l's tail. You see, Powder-Face don't know we is acquainted with his deviltry, an' we'll catch him at ther Dominion to-night, an' I'll git him out on some excuse an' ef he don't spit out ther truth why we'll choke it out," declared Steel Grip.

"Your plan is a good one, and we will act upon it. Be at the Satan's Dominion by nine o'clock and I will meet you there."

After a few moments longer conversation the two miners left; but when, three hours after, Dashing Dandy entered the Dominion saloon he found them both there, though at separate tables.

A murmur of applause greeted the entrance of the King of Fate, but, unnoticing it, he quietly took a seat at an empty table and called for a glass of brandy, which was at once brought him by Rodney.

"Where is Colonel Burton to-night?" he asked.

"Hasn't shown up, sir; in fact, he sent word not to expect him either to-night or to-morrow."

Glancing searchingly around the room Dashing Dandy's eyes fell upon the man for whom he was looking, Powder-Face Jack.

He was seated at a table with several other worthies of a like disreputable fame, and a bruise on his face proved that he had received a severe fall the night before.

Catching the eye of the strange man, in whose arms he had been as a mere child, he made no effort to renew the trouble, but scowled maliciously at him, and viciously dashed off the liquor in a glass before him.

Finding no one who seemed anxious to join him in a game of any kind, Dashing Dandy generously asked the crowd up to drink, and left the saloon.

A few moments after he was followed by Lasso Dan, and the two walked to a lonely and unfrequent spot—a pine thicket on the creek bank.

They had not long to wait before two forms were seen approaching, and Dan whispered:

"That's them; the durned fool bit at th'r bait that Grip gi'n him."

A few paces more and Powder-Face Jack was in the iron clutch of the man whose gripe he had felt the night before.

"Keep silent and you are safe; cry cut, and I'll bury my knife in your heart," was the stern command.

"Don't do it, pard, don't, for I'm innocent as a leetle child," said the ruffian, in whining tones, for he now knew in whose power he was.

"If you wish to save your life you will tell me the truth; if not, you will have to die."

"I'll talk it straight, captain."

"See that you do. Now, tell me why you carried off Firefly to-day?"

The man started visibly; it was evident he had no thought of his latest piece of villainy being known.

"I guess you is jokin' me, capt'in," he said, with a poor attempt at a laugh.

"You'll find to the contrary, for I know that you killed the Indian, robbed the miserable mine he had found, of what gold he had there, and carried the girl off. Now, where is she?"

"I don't know," was the sullen answer.

The stern-willed man did not again ask, but let the sharp point of his knife press hard against the man's side, until he felt it pricking him just over his heart, and then he cried quickly:

"For God's sake, captain, don't kill me, and I'll tell yer."

"I am waiting."

"Waal, I did run ther gal off, for yer see I is a poor man, an' I thought ther colonel would gi'n me a han'some sum for her, bein' as you won her from him last night."

"And you basely shot down the Indian for defending her?"

"Thet was one o' ther accidnts o' war, capt'in; the Injun showed fight, an' we had ter protect ourselves."

"And the girl?"

"Oh, she's a wildeat; but we caught her afore she had a chance to show her claws, or my face w'u'd hev looked like a zebra, you bet."

"Where did you take her?"

"Didn't hev a chance ter take her nowher, for up in ther mount'ins we was set upon by ther road-agents, an' ter save ourselves we skipt an' left ther gal; yer see we didn't behold 'em until two o' our boys dropped down dead."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"I is for a fact; ef yer has a Bible I'll swear to it."

"You'd swear to a lie, you durned galoot, on a pack o' Testimints as high as yer ugly head," growled Lasso Dan.

"And the road-agents carried her back into the mountains?"

"Yas, captain, and we lit out for ther Gulch City."

"In the absence of proof I will have to take your word; if you have told me the truth, I will spare your life, vile as it is; but if you have lied to me, I will kill you—I swear it, by Heaven!"

"Then I can go now, captain?" whined the wretch.

"Not until I prove you have told the truth. Now, Dan, take him to the place you spoke of, and see that he is made secure."

"He'll be so secure, captain, that ef Steel Grip an' myself were ter pass in our checks this night o' our Lord he'd be ter when Gabriel wanted him at Judgment," replied the miner, and they led the hardened villain away by a path leading up the creek, while Iron Heart wended his way in the direction of the hotel.

As he drew near the Traveler's Refuge he heard loud and angry voices, and beholding a large crowd greatly excited, many of them with flaming torches in their hands, he quickened his steps and soon reached the hotel, in front of which the scene was transpiring.

"What is the matter, Mr. Smith?" he asked, as the landlord rushed by him, a revolver in his hand.

"Oh, captain! thank God you have come!"

"Speak, man, and tell me what is the matter!" and Iron Heart laid his hand heavily up n the landlord's shoulder, and with a force that made him wince.

"The youth, sir, the youth!"

"What youth? Whom do you mean?"

"Mr. Leo West; they have him yonder, and are going to hang him. I could not help it, for they dragged him and the guide from their rooms."

But, the landlord was talking to himself, for, as soon as Dashing Dandy heard the name he bounded forward like a deer, crossed the street to the open space in front of the hotel, and hurling men aside from his path sprung into the center of the excited crowd, who were hooting and howling like mad.

As he reached the open space around a huge tree he saw two forms swinging in the air above him.

One glance and he recognized the youth, Leo West, and his guide, Lem Brigham.

Quickly he raised his right arm, a pistol gleamed in his hand, and two sharp reports followed in quick succession.

With a heavy thud the scout fell upon the ground, while, springing forward, he caught the fallen youth in his arms, for his bullets had cut the two ropes.

Then, like a giant at bay, he cried in ringing tones:

"Back, you cowards! I have something to say, just here!"

"Upon him, men, and kill him!" and a tall form sprang to the front, revolver in hand, and Iron Heart stood face to face with Arthur Vancourt, the cattle king and chief of the Vigilantes.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE two men, Iron Heart and Arthur Vancourt, standing at bay, with revolvers leveled, an angry crowd around, and the torches gleaming brightly over all, made up a picture that was wild, terrible, and thrilling in the extreme.

"By what right dare you cut those men down?" cried the cattle king, fiercely.

Dashing Dandy smiled sardonically, and answered in his deep tones:

"By the right of preventing a crime against innocent men."

"I say they are not innocent; they are spies, and members of the band of the Black Captain, and as such they were stung up by the Vigilantes," responded Arthur Vancourt.

hanging innocent men," explained Iron Heart, quietly.

"Guess yer'd better not crowd ther mourners, boys, for ef he says ther fellers is not ter hang, they won't be hung, you can gamble on it, an' ef they is, thar's many o' these parisherners won't tend service next Sabbath day," was Hank Holbrook's odd warning.

As others were now siding with the strange rescuer, Arthur Vancourt seemed inclined to yield, too, and remarked:

"If the captain says he will vouch for the two men I've nothing to say."

"I said so once, sir," and still holding in his arms the form of Leo West, Dashing Dandy moved forward once more, his revolver in hand, and the crowd slowly giving back as he advanced.

Behind him came Lem Brigham, whose bonds Hank Holbrook had cut, and the party who had supported Iron Heart formed in the rear.

As they reached the hotel steps, the crowd, ever fickle, seemed to fully realize the daring act of the King of Fate, and with one accord they set up a yell in his honor. Arthur Vancourt mounted his horse and rode rapidly away, while those who knew him, or pretended to, said he was not the man to allow the interference of Iron Heart to go unnoticed.

"Landlord, ask the crowd to have a drink at my expense, while I see what can be done for this poor youth," said Dashing Dandy, and he went on to the room of Leo West, unnoticing the shouts in his praise, and closely followed by Lem Brigham.

"How did it all occur, Lem?" he asked, as he laid the youth on the lounge.

"Easy as falling off a log, sir, for that devil of a Vigilante captain come to this room, whar ther lad an' myself were a-talkin', an' he says we was durned spies, an' he was a-goin' ter hev us strung up fer bein' members o' ther band o' ther Black Captain, an' afore we c'u'd say a word in rushed ther crowd, and—waal, pard, what are ther use o' chinnin' about, for whar w'u'd we be now ef it wasn't fer you? Ah, Lordy, but you has got more sand than any rooster I ever saw afore! Put it thar, pard, an' God bless yer forever, amen!"

While Lem was talking Dashing Dandy had been busy with the youth, but suddenly started back, a cry of astonishment upon his lips.

"Great God! It is a woman!"

"Durned ef you hain't right, capt'in! Call ther gals, for we hain't no business here," and Lem moved rapidly toward the door.

"Hold on! Stay where you are! See, she is recovering! Mind you, not a word to any one of our discovery, not even to her," and, picking up the false mustache, which, falling off, had betrayed the sex of the supposed young man, Dashing Dandy skillfully fastened it on again, and closed up the open shirt front, where the white, rounded neck had also aided in the discovery—the neck with the cruel rope-marks still upon it.

"Where am I?" and the eyes of Leo West, as I must still call her, met those of Iron Heart.

"You are with friends. See, there is Lem Brigham, your guide."

"Yas, I'm here on deck, pard; but, it's all owing to ther capt'in, for we'd been sent for, an' was a-goin', but he changed ther music, an' all hands sung a dif'rent tune. How is yer feelin' round ther gills?"

"Pretty badly used up; but I will be all right by morning; and I owe you my life!" and the eyes turned upon the rescuer, who replied quickly:

"Don't speak of it; I did but my duty, nothing more."

"Capt'in, ef it wasn't you I'd say you was a cavortin' howlin' liar, for ther man don't rastle benzine that c'u'd 'a' did what you did with a crowd o' shriekin' maniacs; but then, I has heerd of yer afore, an' I has heerd ter-day o' ther tune yer played with ther agents, and yer entertainment last night at Hell's Dominion, or somethin' like that; but, ef yer say yer hasn't done me an' this young feller a favor, I'm durned if we won't quarrel."

"I'll admit anything, Lem, to have peace in the family. Now come, let us go down to the bar; we'll send Mr. West up a drink, and it will do him good," and seeing that the supposed youth was in no more danger the King of Fate sought his room, but not to retire, as with his hands behind his back, and his head bent low, he paced to and fro for several hours, his face pale and stern.

At last, with an effort, he broke his deep reverie, and turned to disrobe for the night; but, as he did so, his quick eye detected a face at the window peering in upon him.

With the spring of a panther he leaped toward the window, but there came a jingle of glass and report commingled, and Iron Heart staggered backward.

As he did so something hard fell to the floor, and quickly he picked it up.

It was a flattened bullet of large caliber that had been checked by the heavy buckle of his pistol-belt, the shock momentarily stunning him, and giving the would-be assassin an opportunity to escape.

The next moment there came a loud knock at

his door, and the landlord and half a dozen others stood without, alarmed by the shot and crash.

In a word he told them that there had been an attempt to assassinate him.

"But who could it be?" asked Jim Smith, seeming to forget that the King of Fate had many enemies.

"Some foe who has wished me out of the way," remarked the King of Fate, not caring to make known that he had recognized in the face at the window the handsome countenance of Arthur Vancourt.

Then a sudden thought struck him, and he said:

"Come, let us see how young West is getting on, for, after the treatment he received, the shot may make him a little nervous."

Going to the room they knocked yet received no answer, and repeated summons gaining no response Dashing Dandy placed his shoulder against the door and sent it open with a crash.

But, the room was vacant; the youth had gone, and through the open window it was evident.

"That man had some deep motive for rousing the Vigilantes to hang Leo West, and as I know the secret of his sex now, and who it was that fired at me, I think I can understand his motive," muttered the King of Fate, and telling the landlord to have him called at an early hour he sought his room once more, and was soon sleeping as peacefully as though he led the life of a Quaker.

CHAPTER VII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

HALF an hour before the shot through the window at the King of Fate, three men cautiously approached the rear entrance of the Traveler's Refuge, and one of them easily scaled the board fence into the yard, leaving the other two to await his return, hidden in the shadows of the surrounding buildings.

As though acquainted with the locality, he moved noiselessly forward until he reached a wing of the hotel, where a small porch ran along the side of the house and overlooked a garden with some pretensions to beauty, for mine host, Jim Smith, knew how to run a public house, and spared no pains to add to the comfort of his guests.

"Yes, that is his room," muttered the man, and springing lightly upon the porch, he glanced into an open window.

A dim light was in the room, and upon the bed lay the form of a man, fully dressed, and evidently sleeping.

Taking a pistol from his belt he twice leveled it, and each time lowered it, as though uncertain what to do, or hesitating to commit some foul deed.

"I could make this bullet do the work, and thus end his life forever; but I am not so certain that it would be so easy to escape," he muttered, showing that it was personal safety that had prompted his hesitancy to fire, and not a repugnance to crime.

"No, I will try this; then, if I fail, I will have the pistol," he said, after a few seconds of thought, and he took from his pocket a small bottle, and stepped into the room as noiselessly as a cat would have done.

Uncorking the bottle he saturated his handkerchief with the contents, and, approaching the sleeper, held the drug near his nostrils, so that he would inhale it.

Again and again he wet the handkerchief, keeping it near the sleeper's nose, while the pungent odor of chloroform filled the air.

"That is sufficient; now to escape," he muttered, and raising the unconscious form as easily as though it had been a child's weight, he stepped out of the window and glided along the porch toward the steps.

As he did so he passed another window, out of which shone a light, and, pausing, he beheld within a man pacing slowly to and fro.

As he turned in his walk, with his back to the window, the midnight marauder glided swiftly by, and a moment after had handed his human burden over the fence.

"Go at once with this prisoner to your rendezvous; tell the Black Chief I sent him, and see that you lose no time," he ordered, in a quick, terse tone, and again returned to the little porch, his revolver held in hand.

The window was down, and the occupant of the room, whom he had seen pacing the floor, was now in a different part of the chamber.

Pressing his face against the pane of glass he suddenly saw him coming toward him, and the eyes of the two men met.

What followed, the reader already knows, and after his, as he believed, death-shot, Arthur Vancourt bounded away like a deer, scaled the fence, and seeking the spot in a narrow lane where he had left his horse, mounted and sped away with the speed of the wind.

In the meantime his two companions in the kidnapping scene, had also mounted their horses, and one of them bearing the still unconscious form of Leo West in front of him, they crossed the creek and turned short off into a canyon running back into the hills.

A ride of several miles brought them to a

steep, pine-covered spur of the mountain, and, as if knowing the way, the horses began to climb the rugged pathway until they at length came to a shanty, before which they halted.

"Waal, pard, you is recognized," greeted a rough voice, as the door was thrown open and a man stepped forth, rifle in hand, while, seeing the burden carried by one of the horsemen, he continued:

"What has yer thar, Pete?"

"It are a fledgling we tuk in, I guesses, for ther capt'in ter hold for ransom at ther hotel; but I are afraid his chips has been called in, for he hasn't said nary a speech sin' we left; take him!"

The limp form of Leo West was almost rudely dragged from across the saddle, and carried into the shanty, the two horsemen immediately dismounting, and leading their horses, they entered the rude, but substantial log-hut, which was built against the overhanging cliff, and fronting upon a narrow shelf that commanded a view of the valley below, and of the Good Man's Gulch in the distance.

The mountain shanty was supposed to be the home of a miserly old miner, who had been digging, for a year or more, a bare subsistence out of a mine, the opening to which was shielded by his log-hut.

Except to go to the Good Man's Gulch for provisions each week, Miser Ben, as he was called, was never seen by any of his fellow-miners, unless they chose to pay him a visit, and it was too hard a climb to his shanty, and too cheerless after they got there, for them to care to make a second trip to the inhospitable old fellow.

As soon as the horses were led in, Miser Ben took his stand at the door, which he had securely bolted, and from a convenient loop-hole kept an eye upon the approach to the shelf of rocks.

"I tell yer, pard, ther young fellow hes skipt these diggin's; he are dead, sure," said one of the horsemen, bending over Leo West, as he lay upon a bench silent and motionless, for his breathing could not be heard.

"Waal, let him went; dead folks don't go chinnin' round o' what they hev seen, and what they wanted to shoulder him here for I can't tell. Ef he's dead, we mout as well leave him until ther boss comes, an' Ben kin keep a eye on him."

"And we'll go on ter camp?"

"Yas, fer I needs rest. Ben, we'll leave yer ther youngster, for I guess you isn't skeerd o' a stiff, is yer?"

"Nary; I hain'tafeerd o' ther devil; but if he's cold meat, yer'd better take him along an' pile 'arth on him," said the proprietor of the shanty, without looking around.

"No, we'll leave him for ther Black Capt'in ter see. Come, Pete," and moving to the back of the hut they raised a large blanket, hanging against what appeared the rocky wall, and beneath, a narrow, door-like cavern entrance was visible.

Without hesitation they entered the aperture, leading their horses after them; the blanket curtain fell back into place once more, wholly concealing them from view.

Hardly had the two men disappeared, when, by the dim light of a lamp that burned upon a broad shelf, the eyes of Leo West could have been seen to slowly open, and gaze around the room.

In one glance he took in the rough interior, with its rude fireplace, humble cot, chair and bench, and few cooking utensils upon the hearth.

Then his gaze rested upon the silent man standing at the door, peering out into the darkness.

Noiselessly the man, whom the three had believed dead, raised his hand and pressed it upon his forehead, as though he were in pain and bewildered.

A moment he remained thus, and then the hand dropped upon his breast-pocket, and upon being withdrawn a pistol gleamed in his grasp, a small Derringer.

As Arthur Vancourt had done at the hotel, where he was the object of aim, Leo West twice thrust it forward, as though to fire, and then, with a shake of the head, lowered it.

Then he arose to a sitting position, and his eyes fell upon an iron bar, and in an instant it was in his grasp, while he noiselessly approached the unsuspecting sentinel, and raised the rod, as though to strike.

But again he faltered, perhaps with fear that it might not kill, and perhaps with fear that it might kill, and for a moment he stood undecided, within three feet of the man, who, by the slightest turn of his head, would discover him, and discovering him would spring upon him for the struggle of life and death.

At length Miner Ben moved uneasily: he felt the mesmeric power of those burning eyes fixed upon him, and he turned to glance over his shoulder.

There was a sweeping sound in the air, a startled cry, a heavy thud, and Miser Ben fell heavily upon the rocky flooring.

"I have killed him! taken human life; but, God knows it was to save myself," cried Leo West, and he bent over the fallen man, but

Dashing Dandy.

sprung to his feet quickly as the blanket curtain was thrown aside, and a voice cried:

"I say, Ben, I've come ter see ef that youngster are raally dead."

They were the last words that the man, whom his comrade had called Pete, ever uttered, for the little Derringer was thrust forward, a flash and report followed, and with a groan of anguish and fright the kidnapper sunk in his tracks.

"Oh, God! two red stains upon my soul that will never wash out," cried Leo West, wringing his hands in despair; but, with the thought of self-preservation again flashing in his mind, he sprung nimbly to the door, drew back the huge bolts, and was out in the open air.

Revived by the fresh wind that was blowing, he rapidly descended the steep hillside, following the beaten trail, and after a long and rapid walk came near the mouth of the canyon, to suddenly shrink down in the shadow of a stunted pine, for he heard near at hand the heavy, quick hoof-falls of a horse.

Hardly had he secreted himself when a horseman appeared in sight, and by the light of the rising moon, which shone full upon him, Leo West saw a tall, graceful man, seated well in his saddle, and dressed in deep black, while his horse was also of a like hue, his hide glimmering in the moonlight.

But, strange to look upon, and which caused Leo West to shrink further back into the shadow, was the discovery that the horseman's face was concealed by a black mask, and his hands by black gauntlet gloves.

"It is the Black Captain! If he had met me further back in the canyon, my doom would have been sealed; I believe, as does the King of Fate, that I am destined to accomplish my end, to rejoice in the revenge I shall yet have, for four times this night have I escaped death; but now to return to the hotel and discover who it was that carried me away, for my brain is all bewildered, and it was only by the mightiest effort I could prevent betraying myself, when I returned to consciousness and found myself on horseback and held firmly in a man's arms."

With a shudder he walked on, now moving with the greatest caution, for day was breaking and he feared discovery; but at last he reached the Traveler's Refuge, and had gained his room door when Dashing Dandy suddenly stepped out into the hall and confronted him.

"You here?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; can you explain how I was carried away?"

"Kidnapped in your sleep, and by one who had you hanged last night."

"What! the captain of the Vigilantes?"

"Yes; you best know what reason he has for wishing you out of the way."

"I do not remember to have met him before, and yet, there seemed a strange familiarity in his face; he certainly is my enemy."

"A bitter one; beware of him; but, come into my room, for I would speak with you," and Dashing Dandy led the way, followed by Leo West, upon whose face rested a puzzled expression, in spite of its haggard and wearied look, called there by the recent thrilling scenes through which he had passed.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLACK CAPTAIN.

THE horseman, in whom Leo West had recognized the famous and cruel outlaw chief, known as the Black Captain, rode leisurely along the canyon, after passing the youth, until he came to the spot where the trail led up the steep hillside.

As though thoroughly acquainted with what was expected of him, the black horse nimbly scrambled up the ascent and was soon in front of the cabin, the door of which swung open, creaking as the wind swayed it to and fro.

"Furies! what does this mean? The door open and no one on guard! By the Lord above he shall die for this!" and the Black Captain sprung to the ground, and with drawn revolver stepped within the shanty, his eyes gleaming through the dark mask, for he could be distinctly seen in the early morning light.

"Ha! faithful unto death," he exclaimed, his eyes falling upon the prostrate form of Miser Ben, and then beholding the rough-looking fellow known as Pete, he continued:

"And that dead carcass explains it; Ben was true to his charge; they fought and both fell. No, by the Eternal, this man is not dead," and he bent over the sentinel, who, just then, raised his head and gazed stupidly around him, until his eyes rested upon the Black Captain.

"Ef yer refers ter me, capt'in, I are not dead yet, though my cocoa-nut has got a feelin' lik' a hive full o' bees."

"It is but a scalp wound, though it stunned you; why did he attack you?"

"Him yonder bain't ther galoot as did it."

"What! and yet I thought it strange that Pete should have proven a traitor. Yes, he is dead," and the Black Captain leaned over the body of the miner.

"Waal, I jist got a glimpse at ther indervidool ther knocked me out o' time, fer I was a standin' with my face at ther look-out when he

let me hev blazes, an' I guesses as how he's ther one as lit onto Pete, too."

"And who was it?"

"A youngster as he an' Kansas Ike fotched here with 'em: they thought he was dead, but I knows now he wasn't."

"No, he was a pretty lively dead man to get away with you and Pete, too, and then escape; but, by Heaven! his days are numbered. Look for the trail, until I send some one to relieve you."

"Guess 'tain't no use, boss; I hain't delikit ef I is han'some, an' this little thing on my head hez jist knocked some brains inter me, fer durned ef I'll b'lieve a man dead, now, until I atten's his funeral."

The Black Captain made no reply, but calling his horse to follow him, raised the blanket curtain and passed into the cave at the back of the cabin.

Though dark as night, within, he went boldly forward, his faithful steed following close behind him, as he ascended and descended the uneven path in the long, narrow tunnel, until a gleam of light was ahead, and he came out into the open air.

He was now in a deep canyon that wound upward and back into the heart of the mountains, and springing lightly into the saddle, he gave his horse the rein and at a swift gait he dashed over the pebbly trail for the distance of half a mile, when he came out upon what was a table-land, a plateau upon the summit of the highest elevation in the vicinity of Good Man's Gulch.

Miles below lay the little town, and around it were visible numbers of mining camps, while, like a silver thread, Serpent Creek wound through the valley.

Around the base of the mountain was visible the stage-road leading to the Gulch, and to the southward lay Madman's Mountain, some six leagues distant.

Before him the plateau was covered with a growth of hardy pines, and through these the trail ran until it came to the other side of the mountain, from whence a path descended into a miniature valley, a safe and lovely retreat in the very midst of the rugged desolation of the surrounding hills.

Upon the other side a cascade fell from a mountain summit, and flowed in a broad stream through the valley, or basin, and upon either shore were half a dozen rudely constructed cabins, in front of which were groups of men cooking the morning meal.

Feeding upon the rich grass along the base of the hills were troops of fine horses, and back near the cascade, and in the shadows of a clump of firs, was visible a cabin far more pretentious than the others.

Like a statue the Black Captain sat upon his horse and gazed upon the scene below, while he said half aloud:

"And there lies my home—the home of an outlaw! Oh! what would I not give to blot out the past fifteen years of my life, and live over again my existence. Then, in that long ago, I was honored among men; now I am hunted by my fellow-beings as worse than the wild beasts whose haunts lie in these hills, as mine does. Why can I not tear myself away, and live the remainder of my days far from here, doing some good in the world ere I die?"

"Bah! I am a fool to give vent to the thought, for what good could I do! Every dollar I possess is blood-stained, and there as here I am a hunted man; ay, and I feel that there is one upon my path who will show me no mercy. Well, it is but fair, for no mercy did I show that one. Come, Ebony Angel, let us go to our quarters, for there is work before us."

The noble horse of an ignoble master seemed to understand what was said to him, for he moved on down the trail into the little valley, and winding along the bank of the creek he soon came to the group of cabins, the rough occupants of each one saluting their chief politely.

"Where is Kansas Ike?" asked the chief, sternly.

"He are asleep, capt'in; jist comed in awhile ago," answered one of the men.

"Tell him to come here."

A moment after the burly ruffian stood before his chief.

"You were intrusted with a prisoner, by Captain Vancourt of the Vigilantes?" he asserted, rather than asked.

"Yas, captain."

"He was sent to me to hold for ransom, I suppose?"

"That's about it."

"Well, where is he?"

There was something in the chief's tone that Kansas Ike did not half like, and he turned pale, as he gazed upon that black, impenetrable mask, the face beneath which had never been seen by one of the band of road-agents.

"Waal, capt'in, he were about dead when we got him, an' he were cold meat when we reached ther shanty; but we didn't kill him, boss."

"No, but you left a man there whom you did not take the trouble to see was really dead, and whom you should have brought on and put in the lockup until I came, and your supposed dead

man nearly killed Miser Ben and shot down your partner, Pete."

"Oh Moses! an' he lit out, capt'in?"

"Yes, leaving the cabin open and the way to this stronghold unguarded, and perhaps known by this time to the whole mining camp."

"Capt'in, for ther Lord's sake forgive me this time," whined the now frightened man, for, as the Black Captain was speaking, he had drawn a revolver from his belt and cocked it.

"No, sir, I never forgive or forget a wrong done me or neglect of duty; your act cost the life of a better man than you, and nearly lost to me old Miser Ben, besides allowing a stranger to discover that this stronghold could be entered through the mine shanty. If you know a prayer, Kansas Ike, you have one minute in which to say it."

The man was now as white as though the life had left his body, and his lips moved in a vain endeavor to speak, for he felt that his doom was sealed.

As merciless as he had been to cries of mercy from others, so merciless he knew would his chief be to him, and he turned his glaring eyes upon his comrades, two score in number, who were gathering silently around, gazing upon their captain and comrade in silent expectation.

"Your time is up, Kansas Ike," and the Black Captain replaced his gold watch and raised his revolver, leveling it calmly at the heart of the doomed wretch, and with a hand that was as steady as iron.

If his face showed the slightest emotion the black mask fully concealed it from view.

"Mercy, captain! mer—"

The sharp report of the pistol cut the word unfinished upon his lips, and severed the thread of Kansas Ike's life.

A dozen hands involuntarily dropped upon their pistols, for the dead road-agent was a favorite with the band; but the sweeping glance cast over the crowd by the Black Captain caused the grasp upon the revolver-butts to be quickly released.

"A dozen of you go at once to the mine shanty, for that fool's work may bring half of Good Man's Gulch upon us; and the balance of you hold yourselves in readiness, for I need you, as the stage goes through rich to-day," he said, quietly.

"Thet fellow they calls ther Dare Devil Dandy, an' King o' Fate hain't drivin', is he, capt'in?" asked one of the men, in a tone that caused a laugh from his companions.

"It matters not whether he is or is not; the old hearse is my game to-day," and urging his horse into a gallop he rode on to the cabin, already spoken of as standing apart, and of more pretentious build than the others.

As he dismounted in front of the piazza steps and turned Ebony Angel loose to feed about the door, a person came forward from the cabin and greeted him—one whose youthful, handsome face seemed strangely out of place in that wild outlaw camp.

"Well, Ninez, is there any news?" asked the Black Captain, in a kindly tone.

"The men brought in a prisoner yesterday."

"Who was it?"

"A young girl, known in Good Man's Gulch as Firefly."

"By Heaven, but I am glad of that," and the chief strode into the cabin, leaving the youth looking after him, for he was scarcely over eighteen in years, and a handsome, dashing fellow, whose reckless courage had won for him the position of lieutenant of the road-agents.

As he stood gazing after his chief his blue eyes grew bright and turned almost black, while his darkly-bronzed face became hard and determined, as though some desperate resolve had come over him, a resolve that boded no good for some one upon whom his hatred turned.

CHAPTER IX.

FIREFLY'S DANGER.

UPON entering the cabin, which contained four large rooms, and a broad hall running from the front to rear, the Black Chief turned into a door to the right, which led to his own apartment.

The room was comfortably furnished for that wild camp in the mountain, and scattered around were books, a guitar, rare pipes and other articles with which to while away idle hours that might hang heavily upon the hands of the chief, or rather upon his conscience.

A soft bed, a table with writing materials, a few easy-chairs, a large wardrobe and iron chest, completed the furnishing of the room, unless I mention the various arms, from a bowie-knife to a shot-gun, that adorned the walls.

Standing at the window was a negro of hideous appearance, for he was black as ink, deformed by a huge hump on his back, and as muscular as a giant, while his features were distorted in a strange degree, giving him a look that was brutal and savage.

Of that whole band there was but one who did not fear him, and that one was his master, the Black Prince.

"Afric, there is a young girl prisoner here?" said the chief.

Dashing Dandy.

"Yes," was the quiet reply.

"Who has charge of her?"

"The Lieutenant Ninez placed her in charge of Minna, the half-breed woman."

"Then there is no danger of her escape. Send the maiden to me."

The negro, who, in spite of his hideous appearance, had spoken without a sign of African accent, walked from the room, and a few moments after returned, accompanied by two persons—one of whom was an Indian woman, though her light complexion proved her to have flowing in her veins the blood of the pale-face. She was good-looking, possessed a graceful form, and had been a faithful servitor of the Black Captain ever since a year before he had found her lying ill by the trail side, deserted by her people in their march southward.

The other was Firefly, pale yet defiant.

"Afric, you and Minna can retire. Be seated, miss," and the Black Captain turned politely to Firefly, who mechanically dropped into an easy-chair, though her eyes were intently fastened upon the impenetrable mask in a vain effort to see the face beneath.

"Do you know whose prisoner you are?" asked the chief, quietly, gazing at Firefly.

"I know that a wretch captured me, and killed one whom I have loved as a father, although his skin was red, and that I was sold to your vile band," was the prompt reply.

"You are known in the camps as Firefly, I believe?"

"So I am called; but, what is your purpose regarding me?"

"That depends upon yourself, my dear young lady."

"How mean you, chief?"

"I will tell you. I have learned that Colonel Dick Burton gave ten thousand dollars for you the other night, and a man, calling himself the King of Fate, staked his life to win you from the colonel; have I been correctly informed?"

"Such was the case."

"Well, to see the maiden who was held in such esteem, I had you brought here, determined, if disappointed in you, to sell you to the highest bidder."

"What mean you?" again asked Firefly.

"Simply that I intended to offer you to the colonel for ten thousand, or, again to the King of Fate, if he would risk a game of cards with me for you, his life against you."

"He shall not do it! He placed his life in danger once for me, but shall not again offer it."

"Well, as I am not disappointed in you, there is another alternative regarding you."

"Name it."

"With pleasure: that you become my wife."

Firefly sprung to her feet, her eyes blazing, her bosom heaving.

"Never! Become the wife of a murderer, a man whom I hate, and who is so vile that he dare not show his face to the world?"

It was a home-thrust. The Black Chief was upon his feet, and made two steps toward the girl, as though to crush her in his grasp; but, with an effort, he controlled himself, and stopping suddenly he said, in calm tones:

"The Devil may not be as black as the world paints him, my girl, and I may not be guilty of the crimes laid at my door, while, if you care to see my face, I will show it to you."

He slowly unfastened the clasps of his black steel mask, Firefly gazing upon him with a kind of fascination in her look, as he removed it from before his face.

With a cry of horror the girl started back, for she beheld a face hideously deformed, or scarred by wounds, or fire, into deformity.

With a bitter laugh he quickly replaced his mask, and, with a shudder, Firefly covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the horrible visage.

"Well, ma belle, what say you, now? will you be sold to Colonel Burton, be set up as a stake in a game of cards against the life of that Dashing Dandy, or calmly submit to become the wife of the Black Captain, whose heart may not be as deformed as his face? It remains for you to decide."

"No, no, I will not; I will not!"

"Will not do which, for one of the three you must do?"

"I dread Colonel Burton as I do a snake. I regard Dashing Dandy too highly to permit him to risk his life to save me, and you, I—"

She paused, and the Black Captain finished the sentence:

"Me, you shrink from with utter abhorrence and abject fear."

"Yes! if so you will it," and the beautiful face was defiant now; but the expression suddenly changed as a new thought flashed through the girl's mind.

"I will give you the sum you ask Colonel Burton for me."

"No, no; you could not raise that amount."

"Yes, and more, for my ranch and cattle will bring it; they are worth over ten thousand dollars, and you can have all—only let me go free."

"Ten thousand dollars! Why, the sum I ask Burton for you is ten times that amount!"

A groan broke from the girl's lips; but, re-

covering herself quickly, she said, in a sneering tone:

"You are inclined to flatter; I feel really vain, after hearing what I am worth in the eyes of an outlaw and inhuman wretch."

"Girl, beware! That keen tongue of yours may get you into trouble," said the chief, with a menace.

"I could be in no worse position than I am in now."

"And you will not send and ask this Dashing Dandy to play me the game for your freedom?"

"Never! I would die first."

"Your fate may be worse than death."

Firefly became livid, but she answered firmly:

"I will meet it, be what it may."

"Very well. One week from to-day you become my wife. Ho there, without!"

At his call the door opened and Afric, the negro, entered.

"Where is Minna?"

"Minna is here, chief," and the Indian woman entered the room.

"This lady I place under your especial care. If she escapes I will feed you to my dogs. Take her to the storage-room and let her select from the trunks there what clothing she may desire, but day and night be by her side, though give her the freedom of the stronghold."

"Minna hears," was the simple answer, and she motioned for Firefly to follow her.

Quietly the maiden obeyed, and the Black Chief was left to his meditations, for he did not seem to regard the presence of the deformed negro.

Pacing the room with slow, measured tread, the Black Captain muttered half aloud:

"That girl's pluck and defiant attitude have carried my heart by storm, and she shall be mine, unless she agrees that the King of Fate shall play his life for her freedom; then I would give her up, for I would win the game, and after killing him could gain possession of her."

"And who is this man who styles himself the King of Fate, and who acts, from all accounts, as though he really held fate in his hands?

"There is something in his face that comes back to me out of the buried past, as a specter from the grave; but that cannot be, I well know."

"And yet that he is on my track I feel certain, but what harm I have done him I know not, and why should I remember, after all the wrong I have done in this world— Ah, Ninez, you here! how can I serve you?"

Ninez, the young lieutenant of the road-agents, stood in the doorway, pale, and with a look of pain upon his boyish, handsome face.

"Send that negro away! I wish to speak with you."

The words were more like a command than a request, but excepting to look searchingly at the youth, the chief made no reply, and motioned to Afric to leave the room.

CHAPTER X.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

"SOME ill-tidings I suppose?" asked the chief, indifferently, addressing Ninez.

"Tidings that will jingle harshly on the ears of the Black Captain," was the almost insolent rejoinder, and the tone and manner caused the outlaw leader to start, in spite of his self-control.

"The result of those fellows' negligence in believing the captive from the Traveler's Refuge to be dead, I suppose?"

"No; it does not concern him, or this band; simply yourself, myself and one other, unless you agree to a proposition I have to make you."

"Boy, what ails you? Your face flushes one moment and grows pale the next; are you ill?"

"Yes, at heart; but I will not delay. I overheard your conversation with the girl, Firefly."

"I am surprised that you should have been an eavesdropper; but it matters not what you heard."

"That we shall see, chief; but now to my proposition: I accept the offer made to the man known as the King of Fate: I will stake my life against the girl on a game of cards with you."

The Black Chief threw himself into a chair and burst into a loud, rude laugh, which the youth bore without a shade of annoyance.

"So my lieutenant, whom I never knew to turn his head to look at a woman before, is in love with that bewitching little Sathanas, Firefly?"

"I wish to repeat my offer, chief."

"And become my rival for the girl's hand?"

"If so you will it, yes."

"Will wonders never cease? Well, my boy, I regret to inform you that my love is deep-seated for the lovely maiden, while yours can only be a temporary infatuation, from which you will soon recover."

"Were we to become rivals, your dashing air and handsome face would cut me out, and I would lose my bride, so I will decline all rivalry between us, and keep the fair maid for myself."

The Black Captain spoke in a bantering tone,

which Ninez bore with remarkable calmness, and when he had finished said in his low, musical tones:

"But I offer to stake my life on the turn of a card for the girl."

"But I do not want your life, my son; you are too useful to me, and ever since you joined the agents, a year ago, when we held the road between Denver and Central City, I have been deeply attached to you. Were it but a passing fancy I held for Firefly, I would give her up; but, as it is, one week from to-day she becomes my bride; so, sever the ties that bind your heart to her and be happy."

"And this is your irrevocable decision?" and the voice was low and earnest now.

"I have spoken; do not fret me," replied the chief, in a tone that plainly meant for the youth to let him alone upon the subject.

"Then, Carl Maynard, listen to me!"

At the sound of the name "Carl Maynard," upon the youth's lips, the Black Captain was upon his feet in an instant, his eyes gleaming through his mask, while in a voice of thunder he cried:

"Who are you that dares call me by that name?"

Ninez never moved from where he stood, one hand resting upon the table, the other thrust into his bosom. A strange smile was upon his face, while in a quiet way, yet distinctly audible voice, he replied:

"I will tell you who it is, Carl Maynard, that has dared to mention your name here; will you listen in patience, or will you fly into a passion, send a bullet through my brain, and then find out for yourself who I am that connects that name of years ago with the one who is now known as the Black Captain, Chief of the Road-agents?"

"I will listen; go on," and the captain of outlaws sunk back in his chair once more, his keen eyes striving to recall the face before him from those forgotten in the past.

Clearing his throat, as though he were choking from some restrained emotion, Ninez said, in his subdued way:

"Ten years ago a young girl, a mere child, for she was but eleven, was riding along a mountain road in a New England State, accompanied by her father, whose farm lay in the valley below.

"The horse that she rode was a new purchase of her father's, and a fiery animal that all feared for her to back; but from almost babyhood a thorough rider, she begged, and her parents weakly yielded.

"On the top of the mountain the road divided, one running down to the valley, and the other along the ridge to—"

"How am I interested in this nursery story? Write it out and send it to the Sunday-school Gazette," broke in the Black Captain, rudely.

"You said you would be patient."

"Go on!" was the gruff rejoinder, and Ninez continued:

"The other road ran along the ridge until it broke off in a precipice, four hundred feet down to the river below, and where there was a rustic arbor for parties to come and behold the grand scene for miles around.

"At the point where the roads diverged, a huge owl, frightened by the near approach of human beings, and at the ringing laughter of the little girl, flapped its wings, and with a frightened hoot flew into the dense forest.

"With a bound the startled horse, ridden by the girl, sprung away unmanageable, and sped like the wind along the ridge road, while the unnerved parent dare not attempt to follow, and could only await the dread result, and raise his voice in prayer for God to save his child.

"In vain the girl tugged at the reins; her strength was not felt against the iron jaws of the frightened animal, and, knowing well the precipice ahead, she resigned herself to her fate, when she beheld by the roadside a man leaning upon his rifle, and lying at his feet a huge dog.

"Like the wind she sped by, a cry for help upon her lips.

"The man had heard the rapidly falling hoof-strokes, saw the flying steed, and dare not move for fear he would tound aside and hurl his frail rider to the ground; but, as the animal fled by him, the girl heard one cry from his lips:

"After him, Satan, and pull him down!"

"A loud yelp the girl also heard, a patterning of feet, and then, in spite of the mad speed of the horse, a dark object bounded by, sprung into the air and fastened his glittering teeth into the nostrils of the now frantic steed.

"Madly did the horse strive to shake loose the deadly gripe of the huge dog; it was useless, and after a fierce struggle he stood still, trembling, bleeding, and frightened terribly.

"Just then the dog's master dashed up and received the form of the now thoroughly unnerved child in his arms.

"Do you remember this scene, chief?"

"I do; but what have you to do with it?"

"Be patient and you shall hear."

"Remembering the scene I have described, you will also recall the joy of the poor father, and that the man who saved her life, through his great, noble dog, went to the farmer's house, and there remained for days, for he was merely

visiting those old New England hills for a few weeks of pleasure with rifle and rod.

"You will also remember that adversity fell upon that old farmer, and with all he possessed in the world he emigrated westward, carrying with him his family, which consisted of his wife and two children, the little girl before referred to, and her sister, a maiden of eighteen, who had just been taken from a fashionable boarding-school in Boston, to hide herself with her parents in a wild border home.

"You will remember, chief, that one night, as the emigrant train was encamped on the banks of a small stream, and the camp was joyous with music and song, a band of Indians rushed in upon them, and instantly a scene of horror followed.

"The old farmer, the father of those two girls, fought like a tiger at bay; but he saw his wife fall dead by his side, and all would have been slain, had not succor arrived, for half a dozen gallant horsemen—the Scouts of the Plains, they called themselves—came bravely to the rescue, and the Indians were put to flight, but oh! what a red record left they behind them!

"And the leader of this rescuing party was the same splendid-looking man who had, two years before, saved the little girl from a terrible death in old New England.

"Gladly was he welcomed by the old farmer, and with almost delirious joy did the little girl receive him, for, child though she was, her heart had gone forth to him with idolatrous affection.

"With tender hands the forms of the poor mother, and the others slain, were placed in that lonely *motte* on the river side, and again the train of emigrants moved on, the Scouts accompanying them.

"And each day the little lovesick girl wept bitter tears, as she saw her brave lover grow fonder and fonder of her beautiful sister.

"At length, in a lovely valley, a settlement was made, cabin homes were built, and peace seemed to at last come for the wanderers, who had been forced to give up their lovely farm in New England—peace to all except that wee girl, that little child-woman, who saw her idol slipping out of her grasp, and the one who was drawing it from her, her dearly-loved sister.

"At length, chief, rumors were afloat in that peaceful valley that the brave captain of Scouts was not all that he should be, for men told how he visited the upper settlements and gambled heavily, and on several occasions had taken human life without the slightest cause, while others plainly asserted that he was the secret leader of a band of desperadoes.

"The farmer, hearing these reports, forbade his daughter to speak to him again; but love held her too strongly in its iron bonds, and she fled from her home by night, with the man she so dearly loved; fled, none knew whither.

"In despair the heart-broken father followed, and in anguish of sorrow the little daughter remained in her lonely home; remained until her father was brought back sorely wounded, and her sister was brought back *dead*.

"The father had pursued and overtaken the fugitives; high words had followed; pistols were drawn, and throwing herself forward to protect the life of her lover, the maiden received the bullet in her heart—the bullet aimed by her own father at the man who had stolen from him his dearly-loved child.

"Beneath the willows the maiden was placed in her lonely grave, and for days and weeks the life of the farmer was despaired of, his only remaining child hanging over his pillow until at length he was restored to health; to health of body yes, but not of mind, for the grim specters of the past were ever before him, and the deepest grief welled up from his heart, until at length he went mad.

"Then what hope had that little girl in life?

"None; and yes, she hoped for revenge, and one day fled from her desolate home to find the man upon whom to visit her vengeance for all that had happened to take the sunlight out of her life.

"After long and weary years of tracking him, in which she suffered untold hardships, sorrows and misery, she found him; yes, found him, one year ago.

"And how? Why, in a mad broil one night over a gaming-table (for she gambled to get money to accomplish her ends), the man she sought saved her life, by killing the one whose pistol covered her heart."

"Great God! Inez Vaughan! and in you I behold that supposed youth whose life I saved?" and the Black Captain was upon his feet once more, his form trembling, his voice quivering.

"Yes, I am Inez Vaughan."

CHAPTER XI.

AT BAY.

For some moments after this startling announcement the Black Captain seemed overwhelmed with surprise, and there was something in his nervous manner that proved he was deeply moved.

Calm and silent, Ninez, as I will still call the

supposed youth, stood regarding his chief, his face pale, his lips compressed, and a look of pain in his dark eyes.

"In the devil's name how did you disguise yourself so that I failed to know you?" suddenly asked the chief, as though troubled that his keen vision had not penetrated the disguise of the one who had so persistently tracked him.

"You wear a far deeper disguise, Carl Maynard; but I penetrated it; I knew your form, though your face was hidden.

"With me, I was a happy child of twelve when you saw me, and yet felt myself a woman even then, for I loved.

"Since then eight years have passed, and my face has had stamped upon it the sorrows I have known and the scenes through which I have gone."

"But you were a blue-eyed little blonde then?"

"True; but my face is stained; my eyes have turned nearly black with hate and passion, and this black wig hides my golden ringlets, as this masculine attire does my form."

"True, even now I would hardly know you; and you have sought me all these years to revenge yourself upon me?" and the man's voice dropped to a low and musical softness.

"Yes, I sought you to kill you," was the determined response.

"I did not kill your sister, Ninez."

"In your false throat you lie! Your act killed her, for it made my father take the life of his idolized child, and sent him to become the associate of howling maniacs. Say you, that these crimes lie not upon your head?" and there was a trembling of the voice that showed the deepest feeling suppressed.

"Yes, indirectly I was the cause."

"And more, Carl Maynard—"

"Hold! that name belongs to the past; breathe it not here."

"Ha! ha! for it brings up too hideous specters from the grave! Well, so be it; let it be buried with those who once loved it—*your victims*."

"But, hear me now, and see whether I have cause of revenge."

"I am all attention, my sweet flower of the New England hills, whose transplanting has made her a thorn of the prairies," and the old sneering tone, habitual to the crime-stained man, had returned to him.

"I will tell you, chief, that since I have been a member of this delectable band of road-agents I have discovered from some of the members that *you* it was who attacked that emigrant train; you had disguised your minions as Indians, and made them rush upon that quiet encampment, and then came to the rescue, to gain favor with the settlers, that you might, in the end, more fully accomplish your purpose of pillaging their homes and destroying their families."

"Such was my purpose, and I succeeded," was the unblushing remark.

"Yes, and to you, therefore, I owe my poor mother's death, as I do the murder of my sister Adèle, and the madness of my father."

"Three good causes for revenge, I admit," was the sarcastic response.

"Yes, three terrible reasons why I should have tracked you for years, forgetting my sex, hiding myself under the garb of a man, mingling with all classes of crime-stained wretches, and undergoing everything to bring you to your just doom."

"And you desired to kill me?"

"Yes."

"Why have you waited for one long year?"

Ninez started, and a tremor shook the slender form, but the lips made no reply.

"For a year you have been almost constantly with me: we have been alone together, and, not fearing you, I have laid down and slept: why did you not kill me then?"

Still no answer.

"Often I have thwarted you; been cruel where you were merciful, and once I cursed you bitterly, for allowing a prisoner to escape—an old man I held for ransom: why did you not kill me then?"

A minute of silence followed, and then from the girl's lips broke the cry:

"Because I loved you!"

"Loved me! loved one who had brought only ruin and death upon those who were dear to you?" sneered the man.

"Ay, loved you, Carl Maynard; I loved you because you saved me from being dashed to death years ago. Ah! had I only died then in innocent childhood!"

"I loved you, because, as I believed, you came to our rescue the night of the Indian attack on our camp."

"I loved you for all you appeared to me, ever good, ever true; but, my idol was shattered, and still I loved it, though I knew that my sister worshiped the one I did; loved you when you became stained with the blood of my own kindred; but I sought revenge, and, oh! the tortures that I had in my heart for you, when we should meet."

"At last we met, and you saved my life, and my hatred went out with one glance into your face, for it brought back the old-time look, and

I forgot the hearts crumbling to dust, the brain on fire with grief in a mad-house."

"To school myself against that returning love I accepted your offer and came with you to your devilish haunts, and determined to see how evil was your life."

"Ah! it was far worse than any crime-stained soul could believe, and I determined to act; to kill you, but to let you know by whose hands you died."

"But, alas! the frailty of a woman's vows against the man she has idolized! I could not kill you, and in spite of all your crimes against me and mine I loved you still."

The unhappy woman dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands, while her form shook with sobs.

The chief gazed upon her for a moment, and half drew his revolver, while dark thoughts flashed through his mind to then and there end all danger to himself; but changing his fiendish resolution, he raised his hand from the pistol-butt, and said, as the paroxysm of grief began to wear off:

"And would you kill me now, Ninez?"

"No! and yes."

"That is a paradoxical way of answering; make it clear, please, to my obtuse mind."

"No, if you do as I wish; yes, if you refuse," and the eyes burned brightly through their tears.

"Name the terms of my life," and the Black Captain laughed lightly.

"You now know that one who will kill you is upon your path:—will you stake the girl, Firefly, against my life?"

"The green-eyed monster of jealousy, by all that's holy!" cried the chief, seemingly highly pleased.

"Call it so, for I swear that you shall never drag that girl down to shame."

"Is your desire to protect her caused by your love of right, or a desire to prevent me from bestowing my affections upon another woman than yourself—for, as you have confessed your love for me, surely I can ask this question without seeming vanity."

"As you please; she shall not become your toy."

"And for her release you offer to play me a game of cards, staking your life if you lose?"

"I do."

"You are a splendid hand with the pasteboards, Ninez, and it would be a close game; but if I won I would take your life as coolly as I did that of Kansas Ike, this morning, and then have the girl, too."

"Yes, there is the risk I run; but I'll chance it, for Fate may aid me, as it does that splendid man, the Dashing Dandy."

"I've a notion to risk it; but no, I will not, for I don't want your life, and I do wish to make Firefly my bride."

"Now, how do we stand toward each other—are you still my lieutenant?"

"Yes; but if you persist in your determination to marry that girl, I swear to you that I shall kill you and release her."

"What! do you dare me?"

"I do!"

Like a flash two pistols were leveled, each ominous muzzle covering a heart: the one, the heart of a man, the other, the heart of a woman.

CHAPTER XII.

"HOLD HARD! UP WITH YOUR HANDS!"

It was a startling picture, those two facing each other with deadly intent.

The tall, muscular form of the Black Captain a head and shoulders above the slender, but wiry figure of Ninez, and the face of the one filled with determination, the face of the other hidden beneath that black steel mask.

The tiny hand of the girl grasped firmly the butt of her revolver, and her finger, without a tremor, rested upon the trigger, as her eye glanced along the barrel with sure and deadly aim.

The black gauntlet-gloved hand of the chief held his revolver without the quiver of a nerve, and his aim was ever too true to doubt that the bullet would fail to find the heart it sought.

Should they fire together both must fall; should the finger of one move it would be the signal for two reports, and well each knew it.

Thus they stood at bay for full a moment; the man not willing to take the chances of the shots, though caring nothing for the woman's life.

The woman not wishing to kill unless driven to it.

The one would utter no word from pride in his manhood; the other would offer no terms from defiance.

Suddenly the door opened and in walked the deformed negro, Afric.

He betrayed no surprise at what he saw, and if he had heard all that had passed within the room he showed no sign of it.

Without a word he walked between those two, the chief and his lieutenant, and fearlessly placed his huge hands over the muzzle of each revolver, pressing them at the same time upward, while he said, in unmoved tones:

"Chief, the guard has arrived with the in-

formation that the stage-coach has passed Dead Man's Trace."

"Good! then there is no time to lose. Lieutenant Ninez, gather the men and await me at the rocky pass," and the Black Captain spoke in an ordinary tone, and thrust his revolver back into his belt, though he gave a sigh as of relief.

And, as though the two had stood in innocent tableau, the girl was equally as cool, replying in an indifferent tone:

"All right, sir; I will have the men ready; do you take all?"

"No, half a dozen are sufficient with ourselves, for I do not anticipate resistance."

Without another word Ninez left the room; but, before going out of the cabin walked over to the chamber where Firefly and her Indian guard were quartered.

Boldly knocking at the door, it was opened by Minna.

"Where is the maiden?"

"Yonder by the window."

Coming to her Ninez said, in a tone of hope:

"Be cheerful, for no harm shall befall you here, and soon you shall be free; I have sworn it."

Firefly sprung to her feet, and gladly would she have expressed her thanks to the supposed handsome youth; but, without another word, the one who had filled her heart with hope turned and left the room.

"Minna, who is that?" asked Firefly, eagerly.

"Lieutenant to the chief."

"He is strangely young and handsome, to be a leader of rude men. He seems like one who would fear scenes of carnage."

"Ninez does not fear the Evil Spirit; he has a good heart, but he is a devil, the men say, if his heart is an 'ry."

"Did you be r what he told me?"

"Minna has ears."

"And will he keep his word?"

"Minna watches the Firefly; he cannot."

"And you are but a woman, a slave of the chief, and he a leader."

"Minna loves the chief; she will kill the Firefly before she would break her word."

Firefly said no more; she knew the Indian nature too well to believe that anything in the world would make her guard faithless to her trust.

Turning to the window her eyes fell upon the young lieutenant, mounted upon a snow-white mustang, cantering down toward the cabins of the outlaws.

A moment after she beheld the Black Captain ride in the same direction, astride of his splendid black steed, and still gazing after them, she watched the party of eight men, for the chief was joined by Ninez and the six agents selected for the expedition, go off at a rapid gallop and disappear over a spur in the mountains.

Continuing at a swift pace the chief and his followers passed out of the outlaws' valley retreat, and came to a lofty peak of the mountain, which some terrible revolution of nature had rent in twain, leaving a chasm some hundred feet in depth and five in width.

Through this narrow crevice, which was long and winding, for it extended through the dense hill of rock, the party continued, until they encountered a rocky barrier, behind which stood a man on guard.

"She's comin' a-b'ilin', capt'in; she just tooted her horn awhile since at ther buryin'-ground," said the sentinel to the Black Captain, and referring to the spot where a score of graves marked the scene of road-agent attacks upon the stage-coach.

"That devil's cub, Hank Holbrook, must be driving then, for no other fool would have the bravado to blow his bugle in these mountains," said the Black Captain.

"He mout hev a hornets' nest inside ther hearse to-day, and be anxious ter hev us stir 'em up," suggested one of the outlaws.

"If his coach was filled with soldiers I would stop it to-day, for, besides the treasure, it bears one I am in need of. Come!"

He urged his horse over the barrier, and leading the way through the thicket of mountain pines, soon took up a position that was advantageous for an attack upon the coming coach.

Placing his men in positions where he wanted them, and calling to Ninez to accompany him, the Black Captain took refuge behind a huge boulder at the side of the road, and which in passing the coach must come within ten feet of.

He gave no orders, for the lieutenant and all seemed well drilled and understood fully what was expected of them.

Presently the winding of the stage-horn was again heard, and played by no mean musician, for its notes rose and fell with cadence on the air, penetrating the dark defiles and forest, and floating far away in melody.

"That fellow is bold to-day," muttered the Black Captain, and his eyes were bent upon the curve of the narrow road, around which he knew the stage must soon dash in view, for that it was coming on at a rattling pace was evident from the rapid hoof-falls of the horses' feet and rolling of the heavy wheels.

An instant more and it swept around the

curve at a swift trot, and Hank Holbrook held the ribbons, for it was his boast that he could drive his teams from one station to another and never touch the reins, and he was determined not to lay off more than one trip on account of the slight wound in his arm.

"As I expected; that accursed Holbrook is driving, and, by Heaven! my human game is on the box by his side."

The Black Captain spoke with suppressed joy, and his eyes burned as they fell upon the person who was now seen not only to be seated by the side of Hank Holbrook but was also driving, and holding the lines, too, with consummate skill, while the "Prince of the Ribbons" sat quietly at ease smoking a cigar.

"He is in undress uniform, and a stranger to me," said Ninez, quietly.

"Yes, he is a major of cavalry in the United States army, and not a stranger to me; but, be ready, for they are upon us," and as the Black Captain spoke he gave a low whistle that placed his concealed men on their guard.

Another moment and his deep, commanding tones cut the air:

"Hold hard! Up with your hands!"

It was evident that both Hank Holbrook and the one who was driving were taken by surprise, not expecting an attack from the road-agents so soon after their last escapade, and the major, as the Black Captain had said he was, jerked the whip from its holster, as if to rush the team over all opposition.

But, Hank Holbrook, who had halted at the startling command then issued a hundred of times, and knew well the danger of disobeying, called out quickly:

"Whoa!"

The well-trained six-in-hand halted like soldiers on parade; in fact they had slackened their pace at the voice of the Black Captain, having learned by experience what the words meant.

"Down from that box, both of you, and lie on your faces!"

Such was the next order of the Black Captain, and Hank Holbrook called back:

"You bet, my festive pard; I'm obeyin' orders now, seein' as how yer has ther drop on me."

"No, let us resist, and not be overpowered without a blow in our defense," protested the officer.

"Pard, yer is every bit a man, I'm swearin' to, but yer hain't no chance here, fer yer don't git a squint o' yer enemy," said Hank.

"Down with you, or you die!"

There was no doubting the sincerity of this command, and realizing how utterly helpless they were against their invisible foe, the officer yielded, and as he and Hank reached the ground two men sprung forward, presenting rifles to their heads.

"You did well not to resist. Major Tarleton, I greet you, sir," and the Black Captain, followed by Ninez, walked up and confronted the officer and driver.

"That voice I have heard before. Your coward face you dare not show," said Major Tarleton, boldly, while the Black Captain laughed, and Hank said:

"Better not chin to 'em, pard; they isn't angels in this gang."

"My face you shall see, my dear major, before we part company again—I heard of your coming by this route, and came especially to greet you, at the same time feeling a longing to see the shining product of Good Man's Gulch, now that it has been coined into gold-pieces of a market value."

"In Satan's name, how did yer know I carried sich a treasure?" broke in Hank Holbrook.

"I know many things, Hank, my boy, that you little suspect; but, how is your arm?" and the chief spoke in a mock sympathetic tone.

"It are gettin' well, curse yer; how's ther bad citizens o' yer gang ther King o' Fate made stiffs of?" recklessly blurted out Hank, forgetting that he had just given the major advice to be careful in his speech.

"Their bodies lie in the ground back yonder; their souls are doubtless on the road to perdition, where they belong; but, that reminds me to send a message to that dare-devil dandy who calls himself the King of Fate," and the chief spoke without any exhibition of anger.

"I'll take yer message, an', maybe he'll fetch ther answer back hi'self, for he hain't easy outdone in a case o' politeness."

"So I have heard; but tell him from me that having heard of his skill in cards, I wish to play him a game, staking my life against his, and meeting him anywhere he may designate, if he will pledge me his honor, I will not be molested by any one if I win the game."

This astounding proposition took both the major and Hank Holbrook by surprise, it was so full of desperate daring; but the latter said:

"I'll spit it out ter him, jist as yer've give it ter me, an' what I forgits ther major here will remember."

"Pardon me, but the major remains as my guest," was the cool reply.

"What mean you, villain?" cried Major Tarleton, angrily.

"Simply what I say; for a while you are to

remain my guest, by force of circumstances, which it is wholly out of your power to control."

The officer glanced at the man before him, and then looked into the rifle muzzles covering him, and in spite of all seemed as though about to take the recklessly desperate chances of a struggle; but, as if divining his motive, the chief called out in a loud tone:

"Show yourselves, road-agents!"

The four other outlaws immediately stepped into view, and the hopelessness of resistance at once presented itself to the major, while Hank said, in his blunt way:

"He'll bleed yer pocket sure, pard, but he hain't a-goin' ter kill yer; he dare not, as ther sopers would come an' make wads o' him for their muskets."

"In the name of Heaven! who are you?" burst from the lips of Hugh Tarleton.

"Men call me the Black Captain."

"And is your face as black as your crime-stained heart?" fearlessly said the officer.

"I will show you," was the unmoved reply, and once again that black steel mask was raised, revealing the hideously-deformed face, that brought even a cry of horror from the lips of Hank Holbrook, and caused Ninez to shrink back, while the outlaws, who never had seen their chief unmasked, seemed deeply moved.

"Such a face is the index to a soul so black as yours," came from the lips of Major Tarleton, as, having given that momentary glance at his hideous features, the chief replaced the visor, and remarked:

"Do you think so, major? Well, we will not quarrel now," and all noticed the emphasis upon the last word.

Then turning to Hank he continued:

"What passengers have you, Holbrook?"

"Exceptin' the major, ther pilgrims ain't much on this trip; been runnin' light since yer cavorted down on us t'other day; got a miner inside, a Jew peddler, an' a antiquated pilgrim I picked up a few miles back, seein' as he was carryin' a heavy load, and looked a leetle like my ole father in Vermount, God bless ther poor ole man!"

"Well, the box of gold twenties and tens will do, along with the major; but come, Ninez, we'll have a look at the passengers."

The Black Captain, as he spoke, and with pistol in hand, stepped toward the stage door, Ninez by his side; but, suddenly, it was thrown open, and an old man sprung out, the bullet from the chief's pistol whizzing above his head.

For once the aim of the Black Captain had been untrue; but no wonder, for with a cry upon his lips, and straining eyes, he had started back, the cry echoed by Ninez, who also sprung backward, as though from the sting of an adder.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DIAMOND SOLITAIRE.

BEFORE any word of explanation could be offered of the strange conduct of the Black Chief and his lieutenant, at sight of the man who had sprung from the coach, a piercing, ringing cry was heard, and around the curve of the road swept a party of horsemen, riding like the wind.

In the advance rode two men well known to the reader, for they were Dashing Dandy and Will Cody, the Prince of Pony Express Riders!

Behind these came Lasso Dan and Steel Grip, and bringing up the rear were none other than Leo West, the supposed youth, and Lem Brigham, the Colorado Scout.

All had their revolvers drawn, and coming on like a whirlwind were a desperate band to meet.

And so seemed to think the Black Chief and his followers, for they bounded to their former places of concealment, sprung upon their horses, and, firing as they retreated, sought to find cover in the mountain fastnesses, Dashing Dandy and his followers in hot pursuit.

"Come, major, lets us light out; they'll 'tend to 'em," yelled Hank Holbrook, springing to the stage box nimbly.

"But we will join in the pursuit," cried the major.

"No, you're afoot—could do no good. Come, I must git on; look out within thar, pilgrims!" and Hank seized the reins, while Hugh Tarleton leaped to his side on the box.

"Hooola! gi'n 'em Hell Columby, Dandy! sail in, Dan! down with 'em, Steel Grip! touch up ther leaders, pards, never mind ther wheel-horses," yelled Hank, nearly wild, as he saw the Black Captain and Ninez about to disappear in a clump of pines, the four men following close behind, and Dashing Dandy and his followers yet a long way off.

Instantly the King of Fate reined his horse back upon his haunches, threw forward his revolver, and for an instant steed and rider looked like a splendid statue; then followed the flash and report, and out of his saddle fell Ninez, while his horse and comrades bounded on.

"Hooola! that's the music! you're a terror, Dandy," and still shouting his approbation

Hank Holbrook drove away at a slapping pace on the way to Good Man's Gulch, perfectly willing to leave the settlement of the difficulty to the King of Fate and the good men and true that were with him.

Had the Black Captain known the paucity of numbers with the King of Fate he would have stood his ground and risked a fight, for he was no man to avoid a difficulty; but he expected a large force, and his men had before known the deadly aim and desperate courage of the man they beheld rushing upon them, and they were in no mood to linger.

When the shot of Dashing Dandy brought Ninez from his saddle the Black Captain half-checked his own horse, for there flashed across him a desire to avenge the one whom, as his lieutenant, he had learned to love; but one glance proved to him that he must remain alone, for his men were wild with fright, and were driving the points of their bowie-knives into their horses to urge them on.

Splendidly mounted, Iron Heart went ahead of his followers, and thrice again he brought down an outlaw with his unerring aim, which distance did not cause to falter, and he held high hope of overtaking the Black Captain, not knowing that the splendid animal he rode was held in check by the chief, who would not desert his men.

For half a mile the hot chase and pursuit continued, and then the Black Captain and his remaining men dashed into the narrow chasm, urged their horses over the barrier of large rocks and were safe.

Iron Heart saw at a glance that further pursuit was fruitless, and expecting an attack by the whole outlaw force, for he knew not how far away was the stronghold, he slowly withdrew.

"I guesses as how I'll investigate ther pockets o' this cold meat," said Lem Brigham, dismounting at the side of one of the outlaws.

"No, Lem, do not rob the dead, no matter how vile; but let us bury them," said the King of Fate.

"It are your game, capt'in, an' you hev brought 'em down beautiful; but I guesses yer is right about keepin' hands out o' dead men's pockets," and, as if to console himself, he added:

"I never found nothin' in no outlaw's pocket yet, 'ceptin' twas a Penitentiary Bible."

"And what is that, Lem?" asked Leo West, who was very pale, for he had not fully recovered from the severe adventures he had gone through the night before.

"Waal, you calls it a pack o' keerds, I reckon; but come, Dan, you an' Steel Grip help me put these fellers under ground."

The three men at once set to work, and in the soft earth beneath the pines, soon had a shallow grave dug, into which the bodies of Ninez and the two dead outlaws were quickly thrown.

"Guess they is comin', pard," said Lasso Dan, as a distant shout was heard coming from the direction of the pass, and throwing in a little more earth the rough, but noble-hearted bordermen sprung upon their horses and rode on after Iron Heart, the Pony Prince, and Leo West, who were waiting for them at the spot where the stage had been halted.

"It were madness to risk a fight with their whole force, my friends, so we will return to the Gulch, and by strategy and cunning yet circumvent the Black Captain and his band," said Iron Heart.

"Yes, and I am already late by delaying to join you in this little scrimmage; but, as the box of gold on the coach belonged to the Pony Express Co., guess they'll forgive me for the delay," replied Will Cody, and, putting spurs to his horse, the Pony Prince went off like a shot, followed more leisurely by the remainder of the party.

Hardly had silence and solitude fallen again upon the scene broken by the attack on the stage-coach, when a man peered cautiously over a rock, and seeing no one near stepped out from his place of concealment.

It was the old man, whose appearance as he sprung from the stage-coach, seemed to so startle both the Black Captain and his lieutenant, and who had, in the exciting incidents that followed, escaped unperceived to the shelter of the rocks, and had been left there by Hank Holbrook, who believed him inside the coach.

A man of fine physique, erect and powerful, although his long hair and beard were gray: he bore on his back a knapsack, or pack, which he seemed not to notice the weight of, and strapped to it was a serviceable rifle, while he also wore a belt of arms.

Dressed in a rough suit of woolen shirt, dark pants, heavy miner's boots, and worn hat, he did not appear like one too well off in this world's goods, and might have been mistaken for an old peddler, were it not that there was something in his face that showed he was not one to struggle for mere dollars and cents.

And there was a something else in his face which could not fail to attract the attention of the most superficial observer, as there was an intensity of sadness in the eyes, and an uneasy, nervous manner that was pitiful to behold.

Now, as he crept out from the shelter of the rocks, he gazed cautiously around him, and

then started off through the open space, as though he dreaded to be seen.

Suddenly he stopped and stared intently before him, and his features moved convulsively.

It was the newly-turned up earth of the outlaw's grave that attracted his attention, and for full a moment he gazed as though dreading the fatal spot.

Then he stepped cautiously forward, for his eyes were riveted upon an object lying out upon the rich earth.

It was a human hand.

Yes, a small, shapely hand, and upon the little finger glimmered a spark that burned brightly in the rays of the declining sun.

With scared manner the old man approached and looked down into the half-filled grave, in which lay three bodies, the one last thrown in hastily the form of Ninez, the outlaw lieutenant.

Raising the hand, to place it reverently in the grave, the old man started and dropped it quickly.

Then he again took it up and laid his hand upon the pulse, while two words broke from his lips:

"He lives!"

The sparkling gem, a large and brilliant diamond, strangely set in gold, caught his eye, and he glanced closely at it for a moment, and then with a deep moan fell forward upon his face, his head hanging over the open grave.

A moment he lay there, as though unconscious; then he rose upon his knees, and with mad energy began tearing the earth from the body with his strong fingers.

As he bent there at his work his eyes were wild, his lips murmuring incoherently, and with the earth thrown rapidly each side of him, he looked more like a beast than human, seeming like a jackal robbing the grave of its dead.

At length the earth was cleared from the body, and seizing the form in his powerful arms he held it off and gazed into the dirt-bearded, motionless face.

Then a wild, heart-rending cry broke from his lips, and clasping the form in his arms he turned and fled from the spot with the speed of a frightened deer, bounding over rocks and logs that obstructed his path, and rushing down the mountain side to disappear in the dark forest that lay in the valley below.

Hardly had he gone from view when a long, dismal howl was heard, and, as the evening shadows deepened, a skulking wolf crept out of his rocky lair; then another and another, until a score were visible—switching their tails, their noses raised in the air as they sniffed the scent of human blood, and their hungry jaws opened to give vent to their howls of joy at the feast before them.

With stealthy tread they approached the open grave, where lay the two outlaws, and a moment after they were snarling, fighting, yelping, as they tore into atoms the stiffening forms of the two road-agents of the Black Captain's band.

CHAPTER XIV.

IRON HEART'S VOW.

WHEN the stage rolled into Good Man's Gulch, and Hank Holbrook made known to the crowd of idlers, and interested parties, who invariably are on hand to greet its arrival, (for the coming of the coaches of the Overland Route was an important event in those days) the attack that had been made upon them, and its frustration by the timely arrival of Iron Heart and his party, a great excitement followed, and the willing Prince of the Ribbons was importuned over and over again for the story to be repeated, which he did with marvelous additions at each repetition.

"I tell yer, pard," he began for the fourth time, after having "surrounded a glasso' p'izen" he was treated to by Jim Smith, the landlord of the Refuge; "I tell yer, pard, thet road are gittin' to be dangersome, an' ther acts o' ther agnts is really becomin' monotonous, ef yer kin believe me; but ef yer'd seen 'em take to ther hills when ther King o' Fate come a-humpin' it down ther road, you'd 'a' been pleased, same as you'd been tickled with a feather, for it war interestin', I'll swear.

"Yer see, when ther order come for us to throw up our han's, mine went up—you kin gamble on it they did; but yonder plucky soldier, he were for goin' straight through an' take ther chances, for he's game clean through, an' he were drivin', seein' he hain't no slouch with ther ribbons, an' it do hurt my wound al eetle to hold 'em; but, I sings out 'Whoa!' an' of course them bosses stops at my voice, an' then ther agnts shows 'emselves, ther durned Black Capt'in tellin' us thet he knowed o' thet box o' duckits we hed along, an' also sayin' as how he was goin' ter take Major Tarleton—that's what he called ther han'some soldier—in his keepin'.

"I'm sartin them two men hes met before, but ther major says he doesn't remember seein' ther Black Capt'in, who, I'm tellin' yer truth, giv' us a squint at his face; and, oh, Lordy! what a face; he looks as though he'd had it sliced up with a bowie, for it are cut all to pieces and ther grinnin' teeth looked awful, seein' as how he had no lips over'em! I tell yer,

pards, it made me sick, an' it's no wonder he wears a mask to hide it. Durned ef it won't skeer the devil when he calls him up for jedgment. But, as I was a-sayin', pards, it w'u'd have been bad for ther duckits, ther major, and ther pilgrims in ther ole hearse, ef Dandy an' his boys hedn't come along, an' then yer should 'a' seen fur fly; it were a caution ter cata-mounds, I tell yer."

"And the ole man—what o' him?" asked a listener.

"Thar were another mistery, for when that ole pilgrim, what I had picked up on ther road, seein' as how halooked played out, put his head out o' ther hearse, ther Black Captain an' ther han'some youngster with him seemed all broke up; but jist then ther boys dashed roun' ther curve, an' ther music begun, so I lost sight o' ther old 'un, and what came of him I'll never tell yer; by hunky! yonder comes ther Pony Prince now."

As Hank spoke the forms of the Pony Prince and his horse were seen, coming on toward the Gulch at a lightning speed, and soon after he dashed up to the station, and was greeted with a wild yell of joy.

"What news, Will? Does ther boys need help back yonder?" asked one of the men.

"Oh, no; we run them to their lair, and then retreated, after Dashing Dandy brought down their lieutenant and two of his cutthroats; the King is coming, along with Dan and the rest of them; but I tell you, it will be risky riding and driving over those mountains, until the Black Captain and his band are called in," declared the Pony Prince.

"You is speakin' Gospil writ, Cody, an' I for one am willin' to go with a band o' miners an' clean ther agents out," said a stout little miner.

"And I."

"I'm yer honey," and half a hundred other voices chimed in, until it was evident that any number of brave men could be raised to wage war against the Black Captain and his band.

"There comes my strange pard, the Dashing Dandy; he'll make a good captain," exclaimed Will Cody.

"Ay, ther King will be ther captain an' ther Pony Prince the lootenant; hooray!" yelled the stout miner, and as Iron Heart and his party dashed up the crowd surrounded him, and called out to be led against the Black Captain and his band.

"Men, hear me!" and the deep tones of the King of Fate caused immediate silence. "To march against the stronghold of the Black Prince with success would take several hundred men, and cost many valuable lives; I came to Good Man's Gulch for a purposo—to hunt to death the Black Captain."

A yell broke from the crowd, and Iron Heart continued:

"I know the difficulties in my way, and understand fully what I undertake, for there are now in this crowd, yelling lustily with the rest of you, spies of the road-agent's band, men upon whom I could lay my hands this moment, and string to yonder tree as murderers and mountain robbers."

"Point them out!"

"String 'em up!"

"Down with 'em!"

"Up with 'em!"

Such were the cries that greeted the announcement of Iron Heart, who still sat upon his horse, his comrades having dismounted.

"No, I will not point them out; but I pledge you to yet run down the Black Captain and his band; will you wait and trust me?"

The cries that followed proved the unbounded influence which this strange man had gained over the rough spirits of Good Man's Gulch, and with a smile that was unreadable, the King of Fate turned away just as a horseman rode up, and dismounting at the hotel door threw his bridle-rein to a Chinese servant.

Entering the hotel, and greeted upon all sides by nods and words of recognition, he walked up to Iron Heart, and said, pleasantly:

"I have heard of your achievement this afternoon, sir; permit me to congratulate you, and also hope that our unpleasant meeting of last night may not cause ill-feeling between us."

"Mr. Vancourt, I need no congratulations, sir, for merely preventing a robbery, and your cowardly conduct last night toward a mere youth, and his comrade, will prevent any feeling on my part toward you other than contempt."

Had a bombshell burst in the hotel office, it would not have caused greater surprise, and all fell back, expecting to see Arthur Vancourt, the Vigilante Captain, instantly draw and fire.

But he smiled pleasantly, bowed, and said:

"As you please; we may meet again, sir."

"I hope so, sir, and feel confident that we shall," was the calm reply of Dashing Dandy, as Arthur Vancourt turned away and glanced over the hotel register.

"Captain Iron Heart, Major Hugh Tarleton, of the army, desires me to present him to you," said Jim Smith, the landlord, approaching the spot where the King of Fate stood talking to Leo West.

"I feel that I owe you more than thanks, sir, as the Black Captain seemed to have a grudge

against me that betokened no good," and Major Tarleton held forth his hand, which Iron Heart grasped.

"Ha! At last I have found you," and springing toward Leo West, whom his eyes that moment fell upon, Major Tarleton seized him by the arm, and continued, in a loud tone:

"I arrest you, Leonidas Westfield, for the murder of your superior officer at Fort Lyon."

"Impossible, sir; there is some mistake here," said Iron Heart, quickly, stepping to the side of the one called Leonidas Westfield, and whose head had dropped upon his breast, his whole attitude that of guilt.

"There is no mistake, sir; this youth was a lieutenant in the service, and killed his superior officer, was sentenced to be shot, and escaped. He is my prisoner, and as an officer of the army, I warn any one from interfering with me in my duty," and the major dropped his hand upon his revolver.

"Pardon me, Major Tarleton; but *I will interfere*," and the King of Fate laid his hand heavily upon the arm of the officer, and with a power that prevented him from drawing the revolver from his belt.

CHAPTER XV.

A HEART-WRUNG CONFESSION.

"CAPTAIN IRON HEART, for such men call you, I want no quarrel with you, sir," said Hugh Tarleton, sternly.

"Nor I with you, Major Tarleton; I tell you there is some mistake, and if I do not prove you to be wrong, I am answerable to you, sir, for my acts," replied Iron Heart, decisively.

"I know that young man's face well, sir; would know it amid a thousand, and cannot be mistaken. See, his whole appearance denotes guilt," and the major pointed to the trembling prisoner.

"It does not, I say; but come; this is no place to discuss this matter, so come with me to my room, for, as I said before, I want no quarrel with you."

Just then Lem Brigham, the Scout, forced his way forward, crying:

"I has a pick in this heur pie; who is it as says thet Leo West is a murderer soger?"

"Lem, I am arranging this little matter; will you leave it with me?" asked Iron Heart, quietly.

"Durned ef I don't; ther boy will git justice ef you sits on ther bench, capt'in; but should yer need a leetle mite o' help, Lem Brigham, Injun-fighter, Scout, Guide, Hunter, Trapper, and bad citizen ginerally, are aroun' these diggin's ter chip in with rifle, revolver, bowie or claws."

"If I need you, I will call for you. Come, major, and Leo—come to my room," and kindly supporting the supposed youth, Dashing Dandy led the way, and the three were soon in the room, the King of Fate calmly locking the door after them.

Motioning both Major Tarleton and Leo West to seats, Iron Heart said in his quiet, but deep voice:

"I am very sorry that this young gentleman has been thus accused by you, Major Tarleton, as only last night his life was in jeopardy at the hands of the Vigilantes, under their captain, Vancourt, a cattle king, as the large rancheros are called here—"

"Does this not the more prove my accusation?" interrupted the major.

"No, it does not, for I have reason to know that a private grudge was the cause of Vancourt's charge against Mr. West, hoping to hang him as a spy of the road-agents, and thereby get rid of him, and he very nearly accomplished his design; but, sir, so far from being what he was accused of, Mr. West informed me of what he had overheard between some of the agents, when he was supposed to be unconscious, or dead, and thus learning of the intended attack upon the stage-coach, which was thwarted by our going to its rescue, thereby saving you from death, for if the Black Captain has aught against you, Major Tarleton, your life, if once in his power, would not be worth betting on."

"I thank Mr. Westfield for the act that saved me; nevertheless, I must do my duty," responded the major.

"True, if you are certain of Leo West being the Leonidas Westfield you claim."

"Does he deny it?" and Major Tarleton turned toward the supposed youth, who had sat with bowed head, pale face and trembling form.

"Do you deny that you are Leonidas Westfield?" again asked the major.

But there came no reply, the eyes turning beseechingly upon Iron Heart, who answered, quickly:

"I deny it, and yet I cannot tell how I found it out, without the sanction of Mr. West, for by accident I found out a secret regarding him, and which I believe no other person is acquainted with, excepting his guide, Lem Brigham."

In an instant Leo West sprung toward Iron Heart, and said, earnestly:

"Yes, you brought me here and cared for me when I was more dead than alive; I was a fool not to suspect before that you held the secret I wished hidden from the world, at least for the

present; but now that you have become my champion, and Major Tarleton seems anxious to force the matter to a crisis, I will make a confession."

"No, no, not unless you wish to do so, for knowing what I do regarding you, and that you are not Leonidas Westfield, I pledge my word that neither Major Tarleton, with all due respect to him in the discharge of his duty, or any other man, can take you from under my protection."

"Is this a menace, sir?" angrily asked the major.

"Take it just as you please, Major Tarleton," was the indifferent rejoinder.

"Hold! Gentlemen, this trouble must end just here," and Leo West's voice rung out with sudden determination, and both men glanced upon him, as with flashing eyes he faced them.

"Be seated, and I will make a confession, which I know upon the part of this noble man will be held inviolate; may I ask the same of you, Major Tarleton?"

"I do not care to compromise myself, for—"

"I promise you that you will not," declared Leo West.

"Then I promise you, for if I can in any way arrive at a solution of the difficult position in which I am placed I will gladly do so, for I assure you that my coming here was to trace the murderer of my dearest friend, Captain Vanloo, and, having found him, I feel no desire to relinquish my grasp."

Leo West smiled, but it was a sad smile, and he choked back a sob that rose in his throat and in a very low, but distinct tone said:

"Major Tarleton, I know too much of your noble nature to ever believe that you would do one thing that was mean, or prompted by low revenge; that Captain Vanloo was your relative, and most intimate friend. I also know that Leonidas Westfield was accused of his murder, tried, and sentenced to be hanged on the gallows—a fate he escaped then, to meet afterward at the hands of one who caused the whole trouble of his life."

"What do you tell me that Leonidas Westfield is dead? that he was hanged?" cried Major Tarleton, in surprise.

"I do tell you so."

"Then who are you?"

"Be patient and you shall know all—how Leonidas Westfield, a wild boy, obtained through family influence a position in the army as second lieutenant, and by gallantry soon won promotion."

"Wild, wayward, reckless, he was yet never guilty of a mean action, though too easily influenced by any one he liked."

"And such a one was a man whose name was Richard Dorsey, or that is what he called himself, but the bordermen gave him the nickname of Dare Devil Dick, and Gambler Dick, for he was a desperate man and a professional card-player."

"I remember him; it was his testimony that sentenced Westfield, though I never liked the man."

"Yes, he held an unbounded influence over Leonidas Westfield, led him off on many a mad escapade, urged him to gamble, and got him into innumerable scrapes, and I will tell you why he had this power over him: he had saved the life of the young man a couple of years before, and, more than that, had, with his money, whether won by gaming or not, I do not know, saved the honor of the Westfield family, for, driven to the wall by financial troubles, Judge Westfield had appropriated a large sum of money intrusted to his care, and ruin must follow, and with it dishonor."

"Leonidas Westfield made known to Richard Dorsey his father's troubles, and instantly the money was advanced to pay all indebtedness, but it placed the Westfields in the power of a designing villain, who did not hesitate to make use of it; for, owing him his life, and the pecuniary debt that saved the honor of his family, Leonidas became more and more in the clutches of one whose motive was to gain his end or destroy all who opposed him."

"That end was to make the daughter of Judge Westfield his wife; but the maiden had received secret information of the character of the man, never liked him, and refused to have him visit her, although he was the accepted friend of her father and brother."

"Shortly after Leonidas Westfield went West to join his regiment, and Richard Dorsey also left the town where he had been a resident for a year."

"The next heard of him was that he was at the frontier post where was stationed the regiment of Leonidas Westfield, and rumors of the wild life he led, in which he was joined by the young lieutenant, frequently came back to his old home, causing many a pang to the youth's father and sister."

For a moment Leo West paused, seemingly deeply moved; but Major Tarleton gazed fixedly out of the window, and Iron Heart seemed studying a figure in the carpet, and the story was continued:

"Then came the startling tidings that Leonidas Westfield had killed his captain, and the testimony brought up at the trial was to the ef-

fect that the young lieutenant owed a large gambling debt to Captain Vanloo, which he was unable to pay, and also was anxious to get rid of him, that he might be promoted to his rank.

"True, affairs looked bad for the lieutenant, for his most intimate friend, Richard Dorsey, swore to a quarrel he had heard between the two officers, and that the three were out hunting together, and leaving the captain and Westfield together for a few moments, he returned to find the former dead, shot through the heart, and the latter bending over him, and saying that some one had fired upon them from an ambush."

"When examined at the fort one chamber of the lieutenant's revolver was empty, and the bullet in the captain's body was of the same caliber as the five that remained."

"Under these circumstances was Leonidas Westfield tried, and sentenced to death upon the gallows; but, through the kindness of those whom he had often befriended, he made his escape, and none knew whither he went; but he was determined to prove his innocence, for an Indian half-breed, who owed him many favors, had given him an idea of who had really committed the murder."

"After the escape of Westfield, Richard Dorsey disappeared, and some months after, hundreds of miles from the scene of trial, a tragedy followed, for those two met, and the gambler was accused of his treachery; but Richard Dorsey was a man who always held a certain influence over the wild spirits around him, and rousing these to obey his wishes, he went to the place where the fugitive lieutenant was stopping, and in the dead hour of night dragged him forth to his death, for they hung him mercilessly upon a tree by the roadside, and Dare Devil Dick Dorsey had no fear of arrest and trial for the death of the man whom he had accused his victim of murdering."

"This midnight murder of Westfield was witnessed by one who dare utter no word, for he was himself keeping quiet, as he had gotten himself into a difficulty some days before, and the citizens there were not friendly to him."

"But he overheard the last words that passed between Leonidas West and Gambler Dick, and the confession of Richard Dorsey that he had shot Captain Vanloo from ambush that the crime might be laid on the lieutenant, against whom he felt a deadly revenge for the contempt that his sister had treated him with."

"Dragged into the air, without time to utter a prayer, Leonidas Westfield died a terrible death, the victim of Richard Dorsey's revenge."

"Nor was this all, for the fact of his son's supposed disgrace and condemnation to death had broken the heart of Judge Westfield, and he, too, went to his grave; but there was one who did not die, and lived for revenge, and that one was the sister of the murdered boy."

"Determined to find the man who had murdered her brother she came to the West, met accidentally with the very man who had seen Leonidas Westfield hanged, and heard what passed between Richard Dorsey and him, and he engaged in her service, for, in her disguise, he believed her to be a young man."

"And you are that sister?" cried Major Hugh Tarleton, springing to his feet, and stepping toward the one who answered to the name of Leo West.

"Yes, I am Leone Westfield, the twin sister of Leonidas Westfield," was the low rejoinder.

"And such is the secret I discovered—that Leo West was a woman," said the King of Fate, very quietly.

"In deep humiliation I ask your forgiveness for my conduct."

"I grant it willingly, Major Tarleton, for I know, through my poor brother's letters, of your nobleness, and your great love for Captain Vanloo, while, resembling Leo as I do, with this false mustache, I do not wonder that you believed in me you saw the supposed murderer of your kinsman."

"The resemblance is striking, and I assure you that I obtained leave of absence and came here to look up Leonidas Westfield, having heard he had been seen making in this direction some days ago; but his character shall no longer be stained by a false charge."

"No; let it rest as it is for the present, for I am determined to bring Richard Dorsey to justice—border justice," and the woman's eyes flashed fire, while the major replied, earnestly:

"Miss Westfield, more than I can express, am I now interested in this matter, and I beg that you allow me to hunt down this man. Pardon me, you are a young and beautiful woman, and this character of Nemesis does not suit you; so yield to me, and I vow that that man shall receive full punishment for his crimes."

"I would urge that you leave the major to do as he desires; and I may also add that I will aid him in the good work."

"And shall I remain idle while he lives?" bitterly said Leone Westfield.

"Yes; stain not your heart and hands with blood so vile, and, pardon me if I offend you, but if you have need of funds—"

"No, no, Major Tarleton, I am amply pro-

vided for, as I inherited my father's estate, and he recuperated his fallen fortunes before his death; but, from my heart I thank you," and the girl held forth her hand and her eyes filled with tears.

"Miss Westfield, what suspicion I have I will not now make known, but if you will trust me I will offer what I believe to be good advice," said Iron Heart.

"I will willingly be guided by you, for I owe you my life, my noble friend."

"Well, Judge Wharton, a rich ranchero living near here, has a pleasant home and lives there with his daughter, a lovely girl; it is the place where I stopped the afternoon I met you.

"The judge is a talkative, but good-hearted man, and I do not doubt but that you can get board in his family, for I shall ask our landlord to go out and see for you.

"In Denver you can readily purchase a wardrobe suitable to your sex, and I advise that you go there by coach, dressed as you are now, and return in a few days, under your own name, going at once to the home of the judge.

"If you remain here your life will be taken, I feel confident, and from your new home you can watch the development of the major's plans, and also my own."

"I urge as does Captain Iron Heart, Miss Westfield."

"And I take your advice willingly, for you are the only true friends I have on earth," and the poor girl burst into tears, while both the major and Iron Heart were deeply moved at her grief and lonely condition.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SAVAGE GUARDIAN.

THE morning following the attack upon the stage-coach, Firefly was seated upon the small piazza of the Black Captain's cabin, her thoughts anything but pleasant, for, accustomed to perfect freedom, since her parent's death some years before, she had become like a wild prairie deer, going everywhere or anywhere she chose, and utterly fearless she ran risks that would have caused many men to dread taking.

In the impulse of her generous nature, at seeing the Indian in the power of the unscrupulous Powder-Face Jack, she had offered to buy his release and life by offering herself as a sacrifice, trusting to make other terms with the ruffian if in her power, but if not, to stand by her compact, no matter what the sacrifice to herself.

But Powder was a devil of the deepest dye, and being infatuated with the beautiful girl, he was determined to hold her to her pledge, cost what it might; but the offer of Colonel Dick Burton, added to a wholesome fear that a refusal to accept the terms of the gambler, might result illy to himself, caused him to accept, and poor Firefly found herself a stake to be gambled for, yet still determined to abide the issue, as she had given her word. Why the King of Fate had offered to stake his life against her freedom she knew not, unless it were prompted by the same impulse that made her the promised property of Powder-Face Jack; yet, why the colonel should wish to take the life of Iron Heart, she could not imagine.

When the Indian chief told her of the gold "pockets" he had found in the valley near the Madman's Mountain, and asked her to go there with them, that they might secure all they could find of the precious metal, she willingly accompanied him, little knowing the desperate band that dogged their steps.

But, once a captive, her first thought was to plot escape, and then avenge the death of the noble Indian who had been shot down before her eyes.

When Powder-Face had said that the road-agents had taken Firefly away from him, he had told the truth; but he had not made known the circumstance or the fact that there seemed to be an understanding between himself and the outlaws, who came upon him under the leadership of their young lieutenant, Ninez.

Ascertaining the circumstances under which he had gained possession of the maiden, and that it was the intention of the desperado to find a secure retreat for her in the mountains, until he could see Colonel Burton and get his ten thousand dollars for her, Ninez had at once told him that he should give the girl into his possession.

A few words followed that waxed into a dispute, and then Firefly was forcibly taken possession of by the road-agents, while Powder-Face and his comrades returned to Good Man's Gulch, the ruffian leader, as the reader has seen, to fall into the clutches of the King of Fate, who turned him over to the tender mercies of Lasso Dan and Steel Grip for safe keeping until wanted.

Struck with the appearance of the young and handsome outlaw lieutenant, Firefly did not regret by any means the change of captors; but when she found herself in the power of the terrible Black Captain, and when he made known to her the fearful terms of her release, she felt indeed that bitter was her lot.

But, hers was no nature to despond, and she determined to escape if in her power, and hope rose high in her heart, when Ninez came to her

room with the cheering tidings that he would be her friend.

The Indian woman she found kind to her, but that she could be persuaded to aid her in flying from the hateful stronghold of the agents, she knew was preposterous, and she therefore would not make an attempt to bribe her.

When, a couple of hours after his departure, the Black Captain returned to the cabin, and in thunder tones called for his slave, Afric, Firefly's quick perception told her that something had gone wrong with him, and her heart sunk within her as she heard his step approaching her door, which he threw open violently.

"Minna!" he cried, in angry tones.

"Yes, chief."

"I have been thwarted in my attack on the stage-coach and by one whom I am determined to run to earth at once, so see to it that yonder girl does not escape during my absence."

"Minna hears; but the Lieutenant Ninez came and expressed his friendship for the pale-face maiden," said the Indian woman, who always spoke of herself as in the third person, though her English was almost perfect, with just accent enough to make her tone the more attractive.

"The Lieutenant Ninez is beyond finding any one with his friendship," said the chief.

"What mean you, sir? Has harm befallen him?" and Firefly turned quickly toward the chief.

"Yes, he was killed half an hour since by that imp of Satan who calls himself the King of Fate, and verily do I begin to believe that he does hold his own destiny in his hands, for our shots fell harmlessly about him."

With a deep sigh Firefly turned away, while the Indian woman said softly:

"Minna is sorry, for the Lieutenant Ninez was a brave chief and had a heart that was good."

"Well, it is all over with him now; but see to it, woman, that this girl is here when I return, or I will kill you as I would a hound," and turning on his heel the chief returned to his room, leaving Firefly striving hard to keep back the sobs that rose in her throat at the fate of the young man, as she believed Ninez to be, who had only a short while ago bid her hope.

"And slain by that remarkable, but dangerous man, whom men call the King of Fate, and a man of iron heart!"

"I wonder if he was seeking me? No, for how could he know of my capture?"

"And how coolly he let me go after having risked his life to get me out of the power of that horrid Devil Dick Burton!"

"I wish I could solve all this mystery," and she became lost in deep meditation.

All through the night she tossed restlessly upon her bed, while her slightest movement awoke the faithful sentinel, Minna, who slept on a bear-skin thrown upon the floor.

Rising early, and partaking sparingly of a really tempting breakfast which the deformed negro, Afric, with great culinary skill had prepared, she strolled out upon the piazza and sat listlessly regarding the picturesque scene, while Minna, like a shadow, sat near her.

"Minna will leave for a while, but maiden must stay here," said the Indian, after a few moments, and placing her fingers to her lips she gave a long, shrill whistle.

A distant yelp answered, and the next instant a huge and ferocious blood-hound dashed around the corner of the cabin and stood looking at Minna.

"Here, Savage will watch maiden for Minna," and the intelligent dog at once took up a position near poor Firefly, who could not repress a shudder as she looked upon her savage guardian, who had indeed been most appropriately named.

"Minna will go, now," said the woman, and she walked off with the air of one who had no fear of an attempt at escape on the part of Firefly.

For some moments the dog eyed her curiously, until Firefly feared he would attack her, as he sniffed the air and showed his white teeth as though he would like to bury them in her soft flesh; but, having satisfied himself that all was serene, he laid down and went to sleep.

Feeling that he might still have designs upon her, Firefly determined to cautiously steal into the cabin and close the door behind her, telling Minna, upon her return, that she could not bear the agony of that dog's presence; but, her slightest motion caused one of the brute's eyes to open, proving conclusively, that, like Napoleon, he slept with one eye open.

Rising to her feet, to test him still more, she found him at once ready to intercept her; he had been intrusted with a charge it was not in his brutal nature to allow to escape, or prove faithless to.

In despair Firefly again took her seat, and Savage, as Minna had called him, resigned himself to his watchful slumbers again.

Presently there came a whirring sound close at hand and a sudden blow that brought the hound to his feet, and caused Firefly to half spring from her chair with alarm.

But at once she saw the nature of it, and, white and red by turns, she sank back in the

chair, for in the log beneath the window by which she sat, *w's buried an arrow*.

At first she believed that some fiendish being had aimed at her, and yet she dared not move, for if death threatened her by an arrow-shot, a worse death would be hers from the savage brute at her side, should she turn to fly to a place of safety within doors.

To escape a great danger she must face a far more fearful one, and she determined to remain, and turned her eyes about her to discover from whence the shot had come.

At the base of the cliff, forty yards distant, was a clump of low pines, in whose shadow a secret foe might hide; but upon glancing at the still quivering arrow she saw that, if it had been fired from the thicket, it would have been sticking straight out from the log; but, instead of this—the butt of it was slanting upward above the head buried in the log, at an angle of forty-fives degrees, proving that it had been aimed from the top of the cliff, beneath the shadow of which the cabin was built.

Glancing earnestly along the summit, and among the few stunted trees growing there, she could discern no moving object, and wondering in her mind as to who could have sent the missile, her eyes were again bent upon the arrow.

At once was her hand stretched forth, and clutching it, she broke it in two, shoving the pieces into the bosom of her dress out of sight; but not until she had taken from it a piece of paper that had been securely wrapped around the butt of the shaft.

With trembling hands she unfolded the tiny piece of paper, the hound watching her anxiously as though satisfied that something was going wrong beyond his comprehension to unravel.

Eagerly then did Firefly read the littlemissive, and at its contents her heart gave one great bound with hope.

And this is what she read, written in a free, running hand:

"Be hopeful, for a friend is near. Show no surprise at anything that may occur near you. Be brave, watchful, and silent, and all will come well."

"IRON HEART."

"THE KING OF FATE."

CHAPTER XVII.

A BRACE OF STRANGE "PARDS."

AFTER the surprise he had received by being caught off his guard, Miser Ben kept good watch in his little cabin, determined that no one should give him a surprise party again, and especially one whom he believed to be a corpse.

Until it was certain that no immediate attack was intended by the Vigilantes, under the guidance of the young prisoner brought by Kansas Ike and Pete, the reserve sent to the cabin by the Black Captain remained in the cavern, within easy hailing distance.

But as no one, hostile to the agents, put in an appearance, the men were allowed to return to their camp, and Miser Ben once more "held the fort" alone.

Upon the afternoon of the day on which the mysterious arrow had been fired into the very head-quarters of the Black Captain, and as a messenger of hope to poor Firefly, Miser Ben was busy about his cabin, yet, with a watchfulness that had come from long habit, and of which he was hardly conscious, he kept a monotonous looking out of his port-holes of observation, for the approach of any one who might take a fancy to visit the cabin.

Presently he stopped in front of the door and instantly his hand fell upon the rifle standing near, for in front of each look-out were several weapons in a rude rack.

The cause of this movement of caution was the discovery of two personages coming slowly up the steep ascent, their destination evidently being the miner's humble abode.

"They doesn't look pesky dangerous, I snore, but looks is deceitful to depen' on, an' I'll hev ther drop on 'em, fer I isn't acquainted with no sich cattle hereabout," said the wily guard of the secret passage to the road-agents' stronghold.

The persons under the keen eyes of Miser Ben were two men, both of them past the meridian of life, as the long white locks and beard of the one, and iron-gray hair and beard of the other testified.

With shambling gait they climbed the steep pathway, each armed with a rifle, and wearing in their belts revolvers and a bowie knife.

Dressed in buckskin and moccasins, and one wearing a time-worn slouch-hat, the other a coon-skin cap with the tail hanging down behind, they looked just what they professed to be, mountain trappers and prairie rovers—men who had spent a quarter of a century upon the border, and who were willing to fight anything from a red skin to a grizzly, in spite of their age.

"Halt, pard's! I hain't receivin' visitors ter-day," suddenly called out Miser Ben, as the two men approached within a few feet of the cabin.

Both promptly halted—their weapons ready, but more from habit than that they expected trouble, for one of them quickly answered:

"Pint yer ride t'other way, my festive

friend, fer we has ther keerds as will admit us to that durned ole shanty as a dog wouldn't live in."

"Ef yer means them weepins yer carry, why, ye'd never use 'em, as I c'u'd put daylight clean through yer, an' yer never catch sight o' me," said the wary Ben, feeling safe in his position.

"These weepins is not what I means, pard, but in a scratch they is calculated to be useful; but hev yer ever heerd o' Old Red Hand o' the Rockies?"

"I guesses I hev; does yer know him?" answered Miser Ben.

"An' has yer heerd o' Old Solitary?" put in the other stranger.

"I has heerd o' him, too; they is rip-tearin' ole catamounts turned loose when they gits on it, I'm tole."

"Yer is right; we is terrors clean through, pard," said the first speaker.

"You! Is you them sellers I has heern on?"

"We is fer a fact. I is Old Red Hand an' my bloomin' companion are Old Solitary, an' we is on your trail, my beauty."

"Oh, we is grizzlies clean through to tooth an' toe-nails, an' if yer don't believe it jist try us on, for wo is buckskin gloves an' we'll fit," chimed in Old Solitary.

"Waal, ef yer has no business in this heur cabin you'd better git, light out, travel, stampede an' sich, or yer ole bones will be pickin' fer coyotes, an' tough eatin' at that," warned Miser Ben.

"But we hes business in that cabin, pard; we is lookin' fer a galoot as is called Miser Ben," declared Old Red Hand, without showing any sign of taking the advice given him to clear out.

"Waal, what does yer want with Miser Ben?" cautiously asked that individual.

"Thet is my business an' his, an' not yours, yer pie-eatin' wolf," angrily returned Red Hand.

"Seein' as I is ther honey referred to, I'll ax yer biz?"

"If I c'u'd see that durned ugly phiz o' yours I'd know, for I comed from a feller as tole me ther picture o' Miser Ben so as a dog w'u'd know him."

"Who was that feller?"

"He are called Lucky Jake, an' he lays for news along ther Overland line so as sich durned thieves as you be kin git rich out o' gold yer didn't dig; he, he, he! Hes I not got yer thar, pard?"

"Yer hes, but I are awful unsatisfied, yit," again came the cautious reply.

"Yer'd be unsatisfied ef ther devil had yer; but we talks truth, for Old Red Hand got into a muss, called in a feller's checks, ther whole caboodle bounced him, an' I chipped in, an' ther music begun, an' we done ther fiddlin'; but we hed ter light out, stampede like, yer know, on 'count o' ther stiffs lyin' 'roun', an' Lucky Jake tole us to look you up at this heur cabin an' yer'd make us members in good standin' o' ther conference o' road-agents under ther Black Capt'in; an' here we is, tooth an' toe-nail, a hull team an' a horse to let, with a whopper-jawed bull-dog under ther wagin, by Jehosephat!" and Old Solitary shook with laughter, as though he enjoyed having had to fly for his life to the refuge of the road-agents' camp.

"Wa-al, gerloots, as yer comes well recommended, I'll admit yer; but ef yer tries on any hisluttin's in this heur camp, yer skulls will git cracked, an' ther wolves will enjoy a cold-meat lunch off of yer durned ole carcasses; they will, by thunder! Now, there is one more thing needful to git a bunk in this heur dormitory, an' ef yer can't spit it out, thar'll hev ter be a foot-race down that same hill thar, an' a bullet will be a persuin' of ye."

"Ef we were ter say Overland ter Hades, w'u'd thet suit yer, you durned ole fool?" said Red Hand.

"I'm yer honey," was the reply within, and the door, the next moment, was thrown open, and the two strange-looking old men, and stranger characters, entered the cabin, Old Solitary remarking:

"Yer hes kept us standin' so long we've got stiff in ther j'ints, fer our ole legs hain't what they ust ter was some forty year ago; but we is all here, gloves ter fit any wearer as tries us on, by Jehosephat!"

"Yer is known in this heur camp, an' ther boys will be glad ter have yer among us, an' I'm guessin' ther Capt'in hain't goin' ter weep 'ca'se yer come, fer he does like a hull man, an' folks says as how you two is clean grit, an' no mistake. Now sit down an' hev a leetle bite, an' then I'll show yer ther way ter camp, so that ther boys kin baptize yer this night o' our Lord," and having given his guests the bench to sit on, Miser Ben busied himself in getting up the best meal his cabin could afford, and with an alacrity that comported with the idea that he was "entertaining angel's unawares."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A THREE-HANDED GAME.

I WILL now return to the Traveler's Refuge, where the crowd eagerly waited the result of

the game between Iron Heart and Major Hugh Tarleton, and expected each moment to hear the crack of revolvers in the room, to which they had gone to settle the question as to which was right or wrong regarding the identity of Leo West.

To the surprise of all, and certainly to the disappointment of many who desired a rumpus, the King of Fate and officer came out of the chamber together, and entering the bar took a friendly drink in which Lem Brigham, Lasso Dan and Steel Grip were invited to join, an invitation they all three accepted without urging.

"I find I was wrong, Scout; but the similarity between the man I sought and Mr. West is something wonderful," said the major, frankly, in explanation, and his words were heard and repeated by the crowd, scoring another victory for the King of Fate.

"Come to the Satan's Dominion to-night, Dan, and have the Scout and Steel Grip with you," said Iron Heart, quietly, as they left the bar, and an hour after a small stream of humanity was setting toward that gambling hell and favorite resort, for, expecting that the King of Fate would naturally spend his evening there, many determined to attend, hoping for some thrilling adventure before the night was over, for there are many morbid natures that can only live in scenes of wild excitement, and to them Death, if giving them the go-by, is a welcome visitor in their midst.

About nine o'clock two men, who at once became the cynosure of all eyes, entered the saloon and took a seat at the table at the end of the bar, and which by mutual consent seemed to have been expressly reserved for a select party.

Those two men were the Dashing Dandy (as many in Good Man's Gulch persisted in calling the man who registered as Iron Heart) and Will Cody, the Pony Prince, between whom and the King of Fate a warm friendship seemed to have sprung up.

"Champagne to-night, Rodney, to celebrate the escape of the gold-box from the hands of the agents," said Will Cody to the saloon manager.

A bottle of "Widow Clicquot" was placed upon the table, and the cork flew out with a report that made the men in the other rooms hasten forward, believing it a pistol-shot, and that some scene of bloodshed had been entered upon, for where ordinary drinks sold in Good Man's Gulch at fifty cents, and fancy drinks at a dollar, a bottle of champagne went up to twenty dollars.

"Ther Pony Prince hes struck a lead," cried one, learning that Will Cody had ordered the wine.

"Yes, struck it rich, I reckon," cried another.

"Oh, no, only a rich haul saved for ther company by my gallant friend here," replied the Pony Prince, pleasantly, for he overheard the remarks.

Just then the door opened and in came Hank Holbrook and Major Tarleton, and seeing them Will Cody called out:

"Reserved seats here! This way, gentlemen, and, Rodney, give us another bottle; and drag us up another table and set us up a basket, for here comes Jim Smith, as fine a landlord as the West can boast of; and you three as good men and true as ever drew a weapon—Lasso Dan, Grip, and Lem Brigham, come up, for it is my treat, and champagne is the article called for."

The men named, as they came forward, took seats at the two tables, while a basket of champagne was set alongside for use.

"Give me ther plain licker, pard, raal ole tanglefoot from ther cradle, an' none o' thet angil-tears, 'cause it won't wash ther dust out o' my throat; it are no doubt good for leetle babies an' sich, but fer a man, whisky are the bug-juice ter raise ther cockles on ther heart," said Lem Brigham, who had an utter contempt for wine of any kind.

"I'm with yer, pard; wine are good at a Sunday-schule picnic, but it are at a discount heur," chimed in Lasso Dan, and whisky straight was placed before them, while the others were content with the wine.

"Whar is ther colonel, Rodney? He 'peers ter make hisself skeerce o' late," asked Hank Holbrook, after a while.

"He's off at Denver."

"Gen'rally goes in my hearse, but didn't this time," remarked Hank.

"No; he went horseback, I believe, for he said he wanted to hev a look at a new lead or two that night go cheap," answered Rodney.

"Be back soon?" persisted Hank.

"Is yer runnin' his business that makes yer so pertickler?" said Rodney, losing temper.

"Not adzactly, an' ef you gives me oncivil answers, you'll not be runnin' ther business for him when he gits back," came in the quick, angry tones of Hank Holbrook, and well knowing the man the manager made no reply to him, but Iron Heart asked quietly:

"When will Colonel Burton return?"

"He's never certain, sir; he may be back at any moment, but he left no word," answered

Rodney, with more respect in his manner and tone than he ever showed to any one who frequented the Satan's Dominion, not excepting his master, the colonel himself.

Just at this moment the tall form and handsome, yet sinister face of Arthur Vancourt appeared in the doorway, and behind him came several well-known rancheros, members of the Vigilante band, and owning cattle-farms in the neighborhood of their captain; in fact, it was the rancheros, or cattle-men, living some twenty miles away, that had organized the Vigilantes, to protect themselves from the cattle-thieves that infested the country, and which organization had extended to the miners at Good Man's Gulch, as a wholesome example to those who wished to "jump a lead" belonging to some one else.

A look of disappointment passed quickly between the new-comers as they discovered the party of Iron Heart at the table, but they made no remark, and ranging themselves along the bar called for drinks.

"Them elegants is drinkin' wine beverage," said a rough-looking miner of the party, pointing rudely to Iron Heart and his comrades.

"We'll have wine, too, then; give us a table, Rodney, and set up the sparkling champagne, for it is my treat," lightly said Arthur Vancourt. Driving a bevy of dead beats away from a table near by, Rodney motioned for the Vigilantes to take it, and a chorus of popping corks at once followed.

"Ther Dominion are drivin' a rushin' biz ter-night in liquids," remarked Hank Holbrook.

"Yas, an' thet wine will p'izen them galoots for sart'in," put in Lem Brigham.

"They is givin' the'r stumicks a regular surprise, I'm tellin' yer; all 'coptin' ther capt'in, an' he do look as though he'd been weaned on it," averred Lasso Dan, while Steel Grip added:

"Them fellers comed in here for a puppose, pard."

Having dashed off a number of bottles, Arthur Vancourt arose, and without the slightest sign of the wine having affected him, called out:

"Now I'm ready for a game; who'll stake high against me?"

"I'm on hand, Captain Vancourt," and a man approached the table.

A general laugh followed, for the speaker was looked upon as almost a vagabond, and his appearance certainly did not belie the idea, as he was ragged, careworn, and suggested the thought to the lookers-on that he had not a dollar on earth.

A young man of perhaps twenty-two, he yet looked ten years older, for his face was haggard, his eyes deep-set, and a pinched look, as of sorrow and suffering, rested upon his mouth.

Still the face was of aristocratic mold, intelligent, and if not marred by reckless dissipation would have commanded attention in any assemblage.

What his real name was none seemed to know, though he had been over a year in Good Man's Gulch; but his unfailing misfortune in mining, and everything else he had turned his hand to, had gained him the title of Ill-omen Luke, some one having found out that he had in former times answered to the cognomen of Luke.

Who he was and from whence he had come none knew; but, certain it was that he had received a good education, and this fact had gained him an opening in Good Man's Gulch as school-teacher.

But one day he had gone off on a spree, which ended his scholastic career, and he turned to mining, but without success; then to pony express riding, a position gained for him by Will Cody, who pitied his misfortunes; but in this he was unsuccessful, as he got gloriously drunk, and never turned up with the letters intrusted to his care for days after.

From bad to worse he had gone, working for his meals alone, until at length Ill-omen Luke was supplied with another name, in that land rich for cognomens with which to baptize, a la border style, every personage that found a resting-place in the community.

And that other name was Vagabond Luke, a most fitting one, if appearances were not deceitful, for one part of his attire, considered necessary in that land of rough men, was missing, and was conspicuous by its absence: that is, he was unarmed.

If he wore a weapon of any kind it was concealed in the folds of his tattered raiment, and it was believed he never carried knife or revolver, for never had such useful articles been seen upon his person.

Avoiding all difficulties, gentle as a woman in manners, he quarreled with no one, and no one considered him worth quarreling with; and yet, that man, Ill-omen Luke, had a history, as did also his most constant companion—a poor, homeless, friendless, tribeless Indian, who, in spite of his dilapidated appearance, answered to the high-sounding title of Killing Warrior.

Like Vagabond Luke he was an ill-starred wanderer from pillar to post, and his attire was even more scanty, though at his back he carried a bow and quiver of arrows.

What secret tie bound these two unfortunates

together, unless the tie of fellowship in misfortune, none knew; but, seldom was one seen without the other, and now, as Vagabond Luke came forward with his offer to play against Arthur Vancourt for high stakes, Killing Warrior was only two paces behind, and it was evident that they had both been indulging in the cup that intoxicates.

"You worthless wretch, do you think I would waste my time with a vagabond like you?" said Arthur Vancourt, sneeringly.

"My dust is as good as anybody's else," quietly responded Vagabond Luke, shrinking from the attention he had attracted, and the part of his face, visible above his unkempt beard, flushing at the rudeness of the Vigilante captain.

"Yes, your dust is good, if you have any; but, who ever knew you to possess more than a dollar at a time, and that you would drink up?" said Vancourt, in a derisive manner.

"Yes, I am a drunkard and a vagabond; but I have some gold here I came honestly by, and I'll play you a game of cards for a thousand or more."

"Bully for the tattered walkin'-macheen!"

"Back him up, Killin' Critter, with another thousan'!" yelled two of the crowd, and the Indian replied:

"Yes, me lend him money; me got some."

A general laugh followed this announcement, and a voice called out:

"Ther vagabonds is goin' inter the bankin' biz."

"We'll call it five thousand instead of one," sneered Arthur Vancourt.

"Very well, I'll stake that amount," was the unexpected and calm reply.

"Did you ever play a game of cards?" asked the Vigilante in the same sneering tone he had used since addressing the poor wretch.

"They were my ruin."

The answer came in a full, deep voice that was a surprise to all, and with an earnest pathos that made more than one heart present feel a flood of sympathy for the man.

If Arthur Vancourt felt any, he did not show it, but added, abruptly:

"Come and let them still be your ruin; five thousand you said, my vagabond friend?"

"Yes," and Vagabond Luke slipped into a seat, at the same time drawing out from some hidden recess in his clothing a bag of precious gold-dust, and of considerable more value than the sum to be staked.

"Me bet same, if Vigilante is willing; bet on game of pale-face friend," suddenly put in the Indian, Killing Warrior, and another general laugh went round, while a miner said:

"Ther vagabonds is wealthy ter-night; I guesses I'll foller their trade, as it's a line o' biz that pay han'some."

"All right, Injun; put up your gold, and I'll make my pile ten thousand against the two of you," indifferently answered Arthur Vancourt, and the precious metal was at once counted out by the two white men and the Indian, the latter exhibiting a knowledge of the exact worth of the "dust" that surprised the lookers-on.

"Give me a pack of cards, Rodney," called out the Vigilante captain.

"May I suggest that you use a pack not furnished by this saloon, sir?"

It was Iron Heart who spoke, and he addressed Ill-omen Luke.

The vagabond looked up in surprise; had he really a friend in that crowded room, and one who had a kind word for him in the face of the odds against him?

"Thank you, sir; I will take your advice," he said, meekly, yet with evident feeling in his voice.

"May I ask how you are interested in this game?" demanded Arthur Vancourt, angrily.

"Merely as a spectator, who desires to see fair play," was the cool rejoinder.

"Is this a *protégé* of yours?" sneered the Vigilante.

"If he is in distress, or needs aid—yes!"

There was something in the very quiet, yet decided manner of Iron Heart that kept back the rising anger of Arthur Vancourt, and he returned:

"So be it! Now, my beggarly gambler, shall the game begin?"

"Yes, if some gentleman will lend us a pack of cards," replied Vagabond Luke, with a courage that surprised all who heard him, and a large crowd had now gathered around the table.

"Let me chip in, though it is not my play, and offer a clean, honest pack, as I have before," volunteered Will Cody, the Pony Prince, and he tossed the same cards upon the table that Iron Heart had played with against Colonel Dick Burton.

With this Arthur Vancourt felt he must be content, for Will Cody was known everywhere as the soul of honor.

"Is the King of Fate willing that his tattered *protégé* shall play with these cards?" came in the satirical tones of the Vigilante, and the instant reply brought a laugh:

"Oh, yes, for an honest man furnished them."

Arthur Vancourt bit his lip, and, to the surprise of all present, made no reply, for he was

known to be a man ever ready on the draw, and afraid to face no danger.

"Let us begin," was all he said, and the strange game, between stranger players, was commenced.

CHAPTER XIX.

IRON HEART "CHIPS IN."

"I TELL yer, pard, this heur game o' keerds are goin' ter be curious, and as interestener as ever I see," remarked Lem Brigham the Scout, as he elbowed his way into a good position to see what was going on, while Iron Heart leaned against the wall with folded arms, a silent spectator, and by his side stood Major Hugh Tarleton, who observed:

"I am glad you took the poor fellow's part, Iron Heart, for he has the air of a gentleman in spite of his rags."

"Yes, he has seen better days, I feel confident, and that fellow shall not cheat him," was the calm response.

"Yer has got yer claws in a trap, pard, when yer plays with ther Vigilante capt'in, for he are roarin' on luck in keerds," said a good-hearted miner, addressing Vagabond Luke, who smiled, but made no reply.

"Yas, thet man don't lose no dust foolin' with keerds," assured another, as though in praise of Arthur Vancourt.

"You'll hev ter go ter scalpin' wolves, red-skin, an' sellin' ther scalps in Kansas, fer yer dust is goin' to leave yer," another informed Killing Warrior, who, without the quiver of a muscle or the slightest show of interest in the game, stood behind the chair of his pale-face comrade, watching the game as it progressed.

"Shall it be one game, or best two in three?" asked Arthur Vancourt, as the play went on.

"Just as you please," was Vagabond Luke's quiet answer.

"Best two in three, be it then," announced the Vigilante captain, who did not seem wholly pleased with his "hand."

"It'll only prolong ther agony fer ther durned vagabond fools," put in a miner, while another rejoined:

"It are their agony; let 'em enjoy it."

A few moments of slow, careful playing on both sides and a loud cry of astonishment went round the crowd as it was seen that Ill-omen Luke had won, and many were greatly surprised, for they had never seen him play cards before—gambling not being one of his vices.

Arthur Vancourt bit his lip, but said pleasantly, for he would not by anger show his mortification at being beaten by the vagabond:

"You play a good game, my tattered friend."

"I play a fair one."

The answer seemed to strike home, and a laugh followed, while the same miner who had before spoken called out:

"Vagabond stock are risin' in ther market; who gives me a bid for Ill-omen an' ther red-skin, clothes throw'd in?"

"If you make another remark to annoy that gentleman I will pitch you out of that door," and the hand of Iron Heart fell heavily upon the shoulder of the miner.

"I don't want no trouble with you, pard; I know yer," protested the man, willing to let the matter drop where the King of Fate was to be his opponent.

"Then keep thet music-box o' yourn closed up," put in Hank Holbrook, while Iron Heart, having given his warning, turned again to watch the game, the stock of Vagabond Luke gradually rising, as he was now befriended by the Dashing Dandy.

In a short while another game was played and won; but this time Arthur Vancourt was the winner.

With renewed interest the crowd gathered around to see the third trial, for it was to decide, and the stakes up larger than was usually bet even in the reckless Satan's Dominion, while the players were a strange trio.

Gradually the game drew near its close, and a strange silence fell upon that crowd; but each player seemed confident, though Ill-omen Luke was very pale.

As for the Indian chief his features were immobile.

At length the third game drew near its end; another card, thrown down by Arthur Vancourt, and it was won, *the vagabonds had lost their gold*.

"Hold!"

The murmur that broke forth at the result was instantly hushed, for all knew that deep voice, and every eye turned upon the King of Fate.

"Gentlemen, I say that Captain Vancourt has not won this game; behold!"

Seizing the cards upon the table Iron Heart held them up to view.

"By Heaven! if you dare—"

But the words were checked upon the lips of Arthur Vancourt, for the cold muzzle of a pistol was pressed against his ear, and the one who held it was Will Cody, the Pony Prince, and he said, in his quick, earnest way:

"Steady, captain; let the King have his way, and if he accuses you falsely, I'll see that you get fair play."

"And I too."

"Me too, capt'in."

"Durned ef we don't back yer," and a number of other expressions showed that the Vigilante had his friends in that mixed crowd of reckless spirits.

CHAPTER XX.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

FEELING that he dare not attempt to draw the revolver, upon which his hand had fallen at the charge made against him by Iron Heart, Captain Vancourt changed the threat upon his lips to:

"That man dares accuse me of cheating this poor, miserable wretch."

"Are you willing to give this gentleman the game?" asked the Dashing Dandy, laying special emphasis upon the word gentleman.

"Never! I won the game," retorted Vancourt.

"True, it seemed so, but, as I before said, you did so unfairly."

"You have no proof—"

"Hush! I have proof, for here are the three last cards you played, and though they seem all right they belong to another pack."

"You lie!"

The Iron Heart acted contrary to what all expected, for he neither sprung upon the Vigilante captain, or drew a weapon and shot him; he merely smiled, raised the cards he spoke of, and showed that the three referred to were different, the backs of them being differently marked, though of the same color.

"That is an accident caused by becoming mixed at the manufactory when they were put up," unblushingly said Arthur Vancourt.

"It is a remarkable accident that those three cards turned up just at the right time to win for you the game; but if I were to search you I'll bet my life I would find the three cards belonging to this pack, and more of the one from which these I hold in my hand came from."

"S'arch him, boss!" yelled a voice, and it was evident the crowd wished to see it done.

But Iron Heart said:

"No; that is not my business; but I will see justice done these poor men; will you give them the game?"

"No, I will not."

"Then pick up the cards, play one game with me for the money on this table, and cheat all that you can; but if I catch you at it I will kill you."

Arthur Vancourt was in a dilemma; he saw that the crowd was against him, excepting a few Vigilante companions, and perhaps half a dozen other rough spirits who wished always to see vice triumph over virtue, and he eagerly took the chance of another game to escape from his unpleasant predicament.

He was a skilled hand in cards, and he might win, even against the King of Fate, and if he lost, he was out only the sum he had originally bet.

"Go on, I'll play you," he said, recklessly, and the cards were shuffled and dealt out.

Then the King of Fate, as though relying on his name, played with almost reckless indifference, while Arthur Vancourt tried to follow his example, as though desirous of proving how little he cared whether he won or lost.

Rapidly the game went through to the end, Ill-omen Luke and Killing Warrior regarding its progress with far more interest than they had shown before.

"Well, sir, I have lost; your beggar friends are in luck," said the Vigilante captain: "that is," he added, "if you intend giving them the gold."

"Oh yes, I am no thief; you played a fair game that time, my dear captain, and, it is well for you that you did."

Raking the gold together, Iron Heart gave it to Vagabond Luke, who divided it equally with the Indian, and then said, to the amazement of all, and in a cheery tone:

"Drinks here for all, Rodney, and wine for those who desire it."

A yell of delight and applause greeted the generous invitation, and Major Tarleton said, sotto voce, to Iron Heart:

"Poor fellow; a prince in rags."

"Me treat all, too; give pale-faces fire-water," broke in Killing Warrior, and a renewed shout went up on all sides, while Hank Holbrook averred:

"Waal, that lays out my deck; I pass now, an' I only wants ter see a Heathen Chinee come in an' ax me ter guzzle liquids, an' then ther Lord may call in my checks, for I will hev seen enough o' this world."

"Captain, will you join me? The invitation was general," said Vagabond Luke, politely.

"No, I never drink with beggars," was the coarse reply.

"As you please, sir."

"Will bad pale-face drink fire-water with good Injun?" asked Killing Warrior, wholly undaunted by the rebuff his comrade had received.

This was too much for the Vigilante captain, and he jerked a revolver out of his belt, thrust it forward, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet shattered a chandelier and buried itself in the roof, for the arm had been struck up by Vagabond Luke.

In a frenzy of rage Arthur Vancourt now turned upon the man in rags, who had saved his comrade's life; but ere he could deal the death-blow he intended, he was in an iron embrace, for the King of Fate held him in a grasp that his great strength was unable to shake off.

"None but a coward would attack an unarmed man, Captain Vancourt," was the calm remark, and Iron Heart released his grasp.

"Man or devil, or whatever you are, we shall meet again, for I am not one whose path you can cross with impunity," hissed the Vigilante, in a tone of suppressed passion.

"So be it; it will be ever a pleasure to accommodate Captain Vancourt," answered Iron Heart, in a suave manner, and feeling that he had been badly worsted in the eyes of all present, the Vigilante leader hastily left the saloon, a few of his faithful comrades following his example.

"You will not refuse to drink with us?" and the face of Vagabond Luke turned up to Iron Heart, a pleading look upon it, and by his side was the Indian.

"By no means; I have been drinking wine; I'll continue it, for, if one wants steady nerves, he must never mix his drinks," responded the King of Fate, pleasantly, and he sunk down into a chair, the two vagabonds following his example, while Major Tarleton, the Pony Prince and the rest of the immediate party were engaged already in a game of cards at another table, and the excitement so intense a few moments before was all over in that wild set, so accustomed to desperate scenes.

Ordering the drinks, Vagabond Luke said, in a voice that trembled slightly:

"Warrior and myself owe to you that we did not lose our money, and also our lives."

"I caught him cheating you, so interfered; by the way, what made you play with that man, who, in spite of his elegant appearance, and being captain of the Vigilantes, is a most desperate devil?"

"I did so for a purpose; I wished to see if my luck had changed, and if I was to win from him."

"Ah! you have known him before, then?"

"I believe so; and yet I am not certain; oh! that I had the confidence in myself that you have in yourself; you do, indeed, challenge Fate to do its worst against you, and yet you conquer Fate."

Iron Heart smiled at the earnest praise of the vagabond, who went on, after a pause of a moment:

"And you have a nerve of iron—"

"And a heart of iron, too," bitterly said the King of Fate.

"No, your heart is in the right place, or you would never have befriended two poor, beggarly devils, such as are this Indian and myself; you have suffered, doubtless, and only in scenes such as one meets here can drown thought."

"You seem a student of human nature; you, too, have suffered," assumed Iron Heart, sadly.

"Ah! how much, God only knows."

"Well, drown the past, aim higher, and all may come out right."

"Good advice, but I cannot: my life has but one aim."

"Do you need work, or service?"

The Vagabond shuddered, but whether at the idea of work or service, or that the words recalled some unpleasant memory, Iron Heart could not guess.

"If it is to work for, or to serve you, I will say yes," he said, after a while.

"I may need you; in fact, am confident I will; go to the hotel, the Traveler's Refuge, and get rooms, and—"

"No! no! no! I have not slept under a roof for many a long night; I will not go there."

"What! have you no home?"

"Oh, yes, Warrior and myself have a den, and we call it home," replied the Vagabond, with a faint smile.

"Then fix yourselves up, and come to me at the hotel."

"No, this clothing suits us better."

"Ah! you are playing a part?"

"Yes, I am playing a part."

"Very well; I am at the Traveler's Refuge, come there and see me, you and the Chief, and, if I need you, where can I find you?"

"I will come and take you to our home, sometime."

Iron Heart made no reply, but dashed off his glass of wine, and his companions having finished their game of cards, the party left the saloon, the two Vagabonds following them.

Once out of the Satan's Dominion, they separated in three parties, the Vagabonds going toward the mountains, the major, Pony Prince, Hank Holbrook and Lem Brigham in the direction of the hotel, and Iron Heart, Lasso Dan and Steel Grip walking in the direction of the thicket on the creek bank, where they had forced Powder-Face Jack to make his confession.

As the three parties disappeared in the darkness, a man stepped out of the shadow of a doorway, and muttered:

"That would be a bad gang to attack, if to-

gether; but, separately, they can be mastered," and he blew a keen, sharp whistle.

A moment, only, he waited, when a dozen men approached the spot where he stood.

"Three of you go up the mountain after those two beggars; they have over twenty thousand dollars in gold with them; the remainder of you come with me," and the party divided, accordingly, the larger number starting off on the trail of Iron Heart and his two companions.

CHAPTER XXI.

THWARTED.

THE forms of Iron Heart and his companions had nearly disappeared in the gloom, when the party, detailed to follow them, set out upon their trail, one man going on rapidly to keep them in sight and signal to his followers.

Had they gone directly on to the spot where Lasso Dan had remarked that Powder-Face Jack would remain until "judgment," unless he or Steel Grip took him away, it is almost certain that a difficulty would have occurred between the pursued and pursuing: but, hardly had they reached the shadow of the little thicket when Iron Heart stopped suddenly and said:

"I was a fool to let those two poor fellows go on their way unprotected, with all that money with them; do either of you know where they live?"

"Nary, capt'in, but we knows about ther locality," answered Steel Grip.

"Then come on with me, for I feel that they will be followed."

Turning abruptly to the right they glided through the thicket until they came to the base of a hill, and there Iron Heart halted:

"See there!"

A man was visible, skulking along toward the pines, and evidently upon their trail.

"I'll sarcumvent him, I'll sw'ar," said Dan, and he started to leave, when a grasp of Iron Heart detained him.

"He is not alone," and he pointed to the forms following slowly in the rear.

"Guess they hold ther trumps, pard, seein' as how they is three to one," remarked Lasso Dan, in a low tone.

"No, we hold trumps, for we have discovered them; now let us batten on after those poor fellows," and they glided like specters around the base of the hill, until they came to a path leading up into the mountain which sheltered Good Man's Gulch on the north.

Rapidly they walked along until they reached a plateau, or shelf, and above which the rocky crags rose hundreds of feet, and were split by innumerable canyons, gorges and ravines, some of them feathered by stunted firs and pines and others bare and open.

"It's about these diggin's them two beggars hangs out; they's got a hidin'-place heur, I guesses; but, Lord love us, pards, whar did them vagabonds git tha wealth?" said Lasso Dan.

"Guesses they bes struck it rich out o' some lead; but it didn't improve ther clothes and appearance any; does yer know, I jist howled when Ill-omen Luke offered ter play ther Vigilante capt'in fer a big stake; it did look so comical," returned Steel Grip.

"They must have reached their abode in safety— Ha!"

His words were checked by a loud cry not twenty paces distant; then followed the sound of men in a struggle.

A few bounds carried Iron Heart and his comrades to the scene, and they beheld, in the uncertain light, the two vagabonds struggling in the grasp of three powerful men, and struggling bravely, too, for their lives and their gold.

"We has 'em, capt'in; but they fights like tigers, altho' we took 'em off guard," cried one of the assailants, as Iron Heart came up, evidently mistaking him for the leader who had sent them on the trail of Vagabond Luke and the Indian.

The reply of Iron Heart was to dash his fist into the fellow's face with a force that made the bones crack, and sent him reeling and senseless to the earth, while the iron barrel of Lasso Dan's revolver fell upon the head of a second, crushing in the skull.

"Hullo, I don't git a piece o' ther pie, for ther third party are also horse-da-comeback, as ther French say," cried Steel Grip.

"He is dead; I killed him with his own knife," said Vagabond Luke, with the same coolness he had shown at the gaming table, while the Indian, released from the grip of his assailants, stood silently by.

"My man is dead too; how is yours, capt'in?" and Lasso Dan bent over the form he had struck down.

"I merely struck him with my fist; I needed him," was the quiet reply, and in a minute more the ruffian returned to consciousness.

"Now, my men, if you have a safe retreat we will take this fellow there and question him, and I may wish you to keep him a prisoner for me."

"I'll do so with pleasure, sir, if Warrior has no objection," and turning, Vagabond Luke addressed the Indian in his native tongue.

"Warrior is willing, sir; but we must blindfold the fellow, for we will not trust him, should you release him; in you, and your friends, we place confidence."

The King of Fate took a handkerchief from his pocket and bent over the dazed ruffian, and the next moment raised him to his feet, and it was seen that he was not only securely blindfolded but his hands were also clasped behind him by a small pair of steel cuffs.

"Are you certain these men are dead, Dan?"

"Dead as dead-beats is always thirsty, cap'tin."

"Then leave them there, and let us be moving."

"Better throw 'em over ther cliff inter ther river, cap'tin: it won't hurt 'em," suggested Steel Grip, and Iron Heart said shortly:

"Do as you please."

The two bodies were then raised in the strong arms of Lasso Dan and Steel Grip, and borne to the edge of the precipice, which overhung the stream three hundred feet below.

Out into the darkness they were hurled, and then with a rushing sound, like the wings of a thousand birds in flight, they went downward, until, with a heavy splash, they struck the water to disappear forever from human gaze.

The Indian now moved forward, and with his arm on the prisoner to steady his uncertain steps, the King of Fate followed, the others bringing up the rear.

After a walk of half a mile they hal'd beneath the shadow of an overhanging rock, along the face of which grew a tall, limblets tree until the branches were reached, over a hundred feet above.

"Please do not speak here, as what you will discover, I wish kept secret," said Vagabond Luke, in a low tone, motioning to the silent prisoner.

Without a word Killing Warrior then stepped to the tree, and, with the agility of a panther, began to climb the trunk, the others silently watching him.

At length he reached the branches, walked fearlessly out upon one, and stepped upon the ragged end of a protruding rock, to then disappear from sight.

Still gazing upward the watchers below beheld a dark object coming down toward them, until at length it stopped within three feet of the ground.

"Come," simply said Vagabond Luke, and he stepped upon the lower end of what was now seen to be a ladder, ingeniously made out of rawhide.

"And this man?" asked Iron Heart.

"I will hoist him up with a rope; you two men can fasten him on securely," whispered the Vagabond.

"True," and after giving Lasso Dan directions to tie the prisoner securely to the end of the rope, Iron Heart continued: "And then you can go and bring Powder-Face here; it is a safer place; but blindfold and handcuff him first," and be placed in Dan's hand a second pair of steel wristlets.

"You must be a detective, capt'in, as yer carries ther tools," said Steel Grip.

"I always go prepared for emergencies; now go after that scamp, and I will watch for your return," and Iron Heart stepped upon the ladder and began a rapid ascent.

The prisoner was then tied to a long rope, let down by Vagabond Luke, and was hauled swiftly up into the air, a cry escaping his lips, as he believed he was being banged.

"Yer durned idjot, don't yer know when a rope is round yer body instid o' yer gutlet?" growled Dan.

"Guess he knows what ought ter be done with him, an' expects it," answered Steel Grip, and laughing at the man's fright, the two pards turned away, to go after Powder-Face Jack.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CAVERN MYSTERY.

WHEN Iron Heart reached the shelf of rock, which was completely shaded by the branches of the tall pine tree, he found himself in front of a cavern entrance, fully large enough to admit a man in a stooping position.

Before him stood Vagabond Luke, and having received a signal from Lasso Dan that all was ready, they pulled hard upon the rope, and the prisoner was soon landed upon the rocky shelf.

"This is my den, Captain Iron Heart: come in," said Vagabond Luke, and, leading the prisoner, the King of Fate followed his strange companion into a large, vault-like chamber in the solid rock, and from which a passageway was visible leading still further into the mountain.

To his surprise Iron Heart beheld around him comforts wholly at variance with the appearance of the two vagabond dwellers of the cave, for a rudely-constructed bed was in one corner, and supplied with blankets and pillow, while a cot of bear, panther and buffalo-skins, all well-dressed, occupied another.

A table, couple of stools, easy rustic chair, some cooking utensils, a large box containing provisions, and firearms of various descriptions completed the furnishing of the cavern home, if I except several luxurious features, in a

shelf of books, some writing materials, and a guitar.

One glance at the occupants, and then at their rocky abode, and Iron Heart knew full well that Ill-omen Luke and Killing Warrior were playing some deep part in the drama of life.

Over the entrance to the cavern, to shut out the light from inquisitive eyes, or the cold in winter, hung a huge grizzly bear-skin, and this being now down, and a candle lighted, the chamber presented an almost cosey appearance, not by any means resembling the den of which Vagabond Luke had spoken.

"Warrior found this cave a few days after we came to this part of the country; he followed a wounded panther up the tree; see, we have another compartment which I will show you, if I have your pledge to in no way interfere with me, or what you see there," and Vagabond Luke spoke with the easy grace of a man of the world.

"Assuredly; I never allow interference in my affairs, and you are free to ask the pledge of me which I cheerfully grant."

Motioning for Warrior to look after the prisoner, Vagabond Luke took up the candle and led the way through the tunnel-like passage at the back of the cave, Iron Heart following. It was narrow, low, and both men had to stoop; but, after some sixty paces had been traversed, it widened into another large chamber, that seemed to have no other outlet than a wide crevice or two in the roof, and through which the stars were visible.

"This is my asylum," said Vagabond Luke, and he turned his candle so as to throw the light into the further recess of the cavern.

There was heard a clanking of chains, a rustling sound, and dark objects were seen moving and eyes gleaming.

Then, as the light fell full upon the dark corner, the King of Fate, fearless and nervy as he was, started back with a cry of horror upon his lips.

"Great God! are they beasts or human beings?" he cried, in ringing tones.

"Beasts in their natures; human beings only in form," was the cold, cruelly cutting answer.

There were five of them, and they were human; but, ah! what pitiable-looking beings.

Their forms, shrunken, half-naked and dirt begrimed, were *chained to the rocks*.

An iron belt around their waists and a chain three feet long held each in bondage to the rocky floor.

Their faces were haggard, their eyes sunken and gleaming, every feature pinched with suffering, and their hair and beard unkempt.

"Are they madmen?" asked Iron Heart, in a whisper.

"Two of them, yes; the other three are going mad," was the answer, in the same cold, cruel tones.

"Great God! I do not wonder; strange they are not all raving maniacs; but, why do you keep them here, and who are they?"

"They are devils incarnate! I was their victim! I keep them here for revenge," and Vagabond Luke almost shrieked forth the last few words.

"God in Heaven! my revenge is child's play alongside of this man's vindictiveness," murmured Iron Heart.

"And the list is not yet complete; there were nine in all; one is dead, one I spared for his mother's sake; two yet live a free life; but see, their chains are there," and Vagabond Luke pointed to two iron belts with chains attached that lay upon the rocky flooring.

"Save me! Oh, save me!" suddenly broke forth one of the abject wretches, in a wail of woe.

"Take me out of hell!" burst from another's lips, and a general cry for mercy went up, until the man whose deeds had won him the name of Iron Heart became as weak as a little child, and, turning quickly, fled from the den of madmen, followed by Vagabond Luke, from whose lips broke a hard, merciless laugh.

Once more in the outer cave, and Iron Heart brathed more freely; but he still felt considerably unnerved by what he had seen, and turned to his prisoner, by whom Killing Warrior was complacently seated.

"Well, my man, tell me how you came to make the attack you did upon this gentleman and his Indian companion?" and Iron Heart took the handkerchief from over his eyes.

The man gazed in renewed terror when he saw who his captor was, and Iron Heart remembered to have seen him in the saloon of the Satan's Dominion, and knew him as one of the Vigilante band.

"Steak, for I assure you I am in no good humor, and your life is at stake."

"Would you kill me, Captain Iron Heart?" whined the man.

"That depends wholly upon yourself. Now, why do you follow these two men?"

"If I tell you all will you release me?"

"I make no promises. I have no wish to take your life so it is safe, if you do as I wish."

"Well we wanted to get their gold."

"That was evident; but who sent you?"

The man hesitated, but catching the eye of

Iron Heart, and feeling how thoroughly he was in his power, he said:

"You will never let it be known that I told you?"

"I make no promises," was the uncompromising reply.

"The captain sent us."

"What captain?"

"The Vigilante leader."

"Ah! he is then the leader of the Vigilantes and Regulators, formed for the purpose of putting down crime of all kinds, by making examples of those caught in misdeeds, and he sends three Russians to rob two poor men! An honest man, truly; but now, tell me, did he and his men follow me?"

"I believe they did."

"Do you know it?"

"Yes."

"Enough; now, my man, I must hold you as a prisoner for a few days, and this will be your prison; but you will be well taken care of. Remember, sir, my prisoners must be treated well," and Iron Heart spoke somewhat sternly to Vagabond Luke, who answered quietly:

"They shall be; see!" He arose and drawing aside a blanket that hung near his bed, showed the opening to another passageway, while he said:

"This leads into innumerable caves and tunnels; and more, to our gold mines."

A long whistle was now heard without, and going out on the shelf of rock, Iron Heart saw instinctively below the forms of three men, whom he knew to be his comrades and their prisoner, Powder-Face Jack.

While the prisoner was hauled up by the rope, handcuffed and blindfolded, Dan and Steel Grip came rapidly up the ladder, and all were soon within the rocky chamber.

"This are a palace, or I am a liar; an' they is musical cusses, too," said Dan, his eyes falling upon the guitar.

"Ef you an' ther Injun hain't ther most deceitfullest critters above the 'arth, call me a shrieking idiot an' howlin' liar," put in Steel Grip, as he surveyed the scene.

In the meantime Iron Heart had removed the bandage from the eyes of Powder-Face Jack, who gazed around him in amazement until he saw his fellow-prisoner, between whom and himself a sign of recognition passed.

"Powder-Face, I wish to ask you a question: What is the password to admit you into the stronghold of the Black Captain's band?"

The question came so abruptly from Iron Heart that the man started visibly, as did also the other prisoner: but recovering himself he answered, *a la Yankee*:

"How in blazes sh'd I know?"

"Will you answer my question, for I know you to be a secret member of the Road-Agents' League?"

"Yer don't know nothin' o' ther kind!" was the sullen reply.

Iron Heart made no reply, but took from his pocket a small paper and read aloud its contents:

"The man known as Powder-Face Jack must be found. If a prisoner, he must be rescued; if a traitor he must die. See to it."

"THE BLACK CAPTAIN."

"You see this betrays you. I found it upon a spot where your chief had stood, and it is addressed to

"RED DARRELL,

"Satan's Dominion,

"Goo lman's Gulch."

"This heur fellow is Red Darrell," said Lasso Dan, referring to the other prisoner.

"Good, the plot is thickening fast. Mr. Darrell, you have found Powder-Face Jack, and he is a prisoner; but, unfortunately, you cannot rescue him, and if you wish to save your lives you will both of you have to prove traitors to the Black Captain. Now, what is the password to gain admission to the stronghold of your chief?"

In chorus came the answer from the two men, as though each was anxious to save life upon any terms:

"Overland to Hades!"

"That will do. If the password proves wrong you will be the sufferers. Now, sir, can you give these men safe quarters?" and Iron Heart turned to Vagabond Luke, who arose and led the way into the passageway back of the bed.

Silently Lasso Dan and Steel Grip followed with the prisoners, and they all soon stood in a large cavernous chamber, from which a dozen tunnels led in different directions, and upon all sides glittering sparks met their eyes, a sight that caused all to cry out in one voice:

"A gold mine!"

"Yes, this is my gold-room; but it will serve as a prison, too, for the only exit is through the cavern in which I live: I will see to their comfort, Captain Iron Heart, for Warrior will bring them blankets and food."

"Then, I leave them in your hands," and ten minutes after the King of Fate was on his way to the hotel, accompanied by Lasso Dan and Steel Grip; but he could not shut out from his mind the terrible den in the mountain and its mad inmates.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RED HAND AND OLD SOLITARY PROVE THEIR METAL.

LET US now return to the two old hunters left in the cabin of Miser Ben, and tell of their advent into the stronghold of the road-agents.

Having given his guests some refreshments, and learned from them more of the cause that had driven them from living honest lives, to league themselves with outlaws, Miser Ben told them that the Black Captain did not seem to be doing such a thriving business since he had brought his band to the vicinity of Good Man's Gulch.

"Yer see, pard," he went on to say, "when we was in ther lower mining country gold was plentiful, and we ust ter make a haul o' rich metal every few days; but ther durned Government 'established a fort down thar, an' ther sopers made it uncommon warm like for ther agints, for, when ther boys w'u'd stop ther coach, thinkin' they'd got it rich, out w'u'd jump half a dozen or more fellers in blue uniform, an' then there was a tearin' time."

"Waal, one day they cotched ther capt'in, not ther one we has now, but another one, a han'some, dashin' devil, and what they ever did with him none knows."

"An' i'thout our chief, things was workin' bad, for they druv us to ther mount'ins, ther men got ter quarrelin' among ther'selves, an' I was expectin' ter see ther hangman arrive every day; when along comes a man on horseback, an' ther cheek he had was refreshin', fer he said as how he'd be ther capt'in o' ther agents, and all ther time he didn't show his face, for it was covered up with a black mask, an' he wore black gloves."

"Waal, yer knows who he was, as he's our chief ter-day, an' ef he hain't a daisy then yer kin feed my carcass to ther coyotes."

"And none o' ther fellers knows who he are?" asked old Red Hand.

"Nary know; ther boys tried it on with him ter see if he was grit, an' he jist laid a couple out for stiffs, an' dar'd ther others to jine ther scrimmage; but ther fellers said he was a bouncer, an' we made him chief, an' ef he hain't been boss ever sin', then yer kin call me a liar; but come, I'll take yer over an' interdooce yer to ther agints."

Rising, Miser Ben pulled a slender line above his head, and stood as though waiting, his companions watching him attentively.

"Thet string runs over ter camp, an' ther pull I gi'n on it will fetch one o' ther boys; ef I'd yanked it three times, ther w'u'd hev been a dozen fellers here lookin' fer a row. Here are my pard now."

As he spoke a savage-looking road-agent entered the cabin, from the rocky tunnel way.

"What's up, Ben?" he asked.

"I wants ter take my particular 'sociates over to ther camp ter see ther boys. Pards, this are Bad Bob o' our gang; Bob, these are Red Hand an' Ole Solitary of ther lower kentry, an' hevng hed ter light out ter save the' necks, Lucky Jake sent 'em ter jine us; now yer is acquainted."

The three men acknowledged the strange introduction without formality, and leaving Bad Bob in charge of the cabin and as guard, a duty he seemed to fully understand, Miser Ben led the way through the rocky passage to the camp of the road-agents, or rather to their settlement in the valley beyond.

The agents received the new-comers, not in an exactly unfriendly spirit, but with an air of suspicion they could not hide, and which was not to be wondered at in men who led the dangerous life they did.

But the lieutenant in charge, since the fall of Ninez, and in the absence of their chief, knew both Red Hand and Old Solitary well by reputation, and bade them welcome, assigning them quarters in a cabin until the return of the Black Captain.

"Pards, it don't seem jist right ter be doubtful o' our new pards; but I is a leetle mite so, I reckons," and an old scamp, with one eye, and a hideous visage, generally, came forward and eyed the two hunters, closely.

"Ef yer has anything ag'in' us, spit it out, an' don't stan' chinnin' round it like a parson huntin' fer his text," said Red Hand with some show of anger.

"Yes, Bill Dead-Eye, if you have aught against the pards, just make it known," said the lieutenant, whose care in his dress, and dandified style, generally, had won him the name of Fancy Fred; but, in spite of his soft ways and fine looks, he was every inch a devil when roused, and the agents feared him almost as much as they did the Black Captain.

"Waal, I ust ter know Old Red Hand, ther Trapper o' ther Rockies, an' he war a leetle mite different from this one; but I kin mighty soon tell ef it be he, an' give ther boys some entertainin' diversion, besides," answered Bill Dead-Eye, whose cognomen certainly was an appropriate one.

"We're in fer diversion, pards, hain't we, so how is it ter be, Bill?" asked one.

"Waal, Old Red Hand war lightnin' on ther shoot; c'u'd bore a hole through half a dollar at twenty yards, either with pistol or rifle, an'

they say, as has seen 'em, that he an' Ole Solitary c'u'd fire at ther word, same as they was fightin' a dooel down South, an' knock bottles off each others' heads fifty feet apart."

"War thar liquid tanglefoot in ther bottles, Bill?" asked one.

"No, they was empty."

"Waal, I mout believe it; but none but a durned fool w'u'd break a bottle as hed liquid in it, an' them chaps, accordin' ter what I hes heerd on 'em, hain't durned fools."

The remark of Bill, as to the skill of the two huters, seemed to create quite an excitement and interest among the agents, and Fancy Fred, who desired to see an exhibition of their skill, said:

"Pards, I do not doubt you, in the least, for you would indeed be fools to come into this camp professing to be what you are not; but the boys seem anxious to see you shoot, and I wish you would oblige them."

Red Hand glance at Old Solitary, as though in doubt what to do; but the old hunter said, aloud:

"My eyes is gittin' a leetle bit dimish, sin' old age hev been on my trail; but they is good enough yit ter see ther whisky in a stone jug every time, by Jeehosephat!"

"Waal, I'm willin' ef my pard is, but I don't like ter give a free circus ter please a lot o' durned fools. Ef it war turkey-meat ter be shot at, or a bag o' dust ter scoop in, I'd like it better, yet I won't be disobleegin', fer it hain't in my natur'; so, biste up yer targits, pards," and Red Hand rose from where he had been sitting, rifle in hand.

"Yer is ter be ther targits fer each other," volunteered Bill Dead-Eye.

"All right; I hain't partick'ler. Kem, ole man, knock a hole in this," and Old Solitary took from his pocket a half-dollar, and held his arm out, the piece of silver encircled by his thumb and forefinger.

Red Hand backed to the distance of ten paces, raised his rifle quickly and fired.

Instantly the half-dollar went whirling through the air, and was picked up by Fancy Fred, who cried out:

"Plumb center, by Heaven! Old man, you are a dead shot, that's certain."

"Yas, it are beneficial to be, in these diggin's. I knows whar my lead is goin' when I pulls ther trigger; ef I didn't I'd a' been an angil afore this."

Taking a large gold-piece from his pocket, Fancy Fred threw it into the air, crying:

"Put yer lead through that, old man."

The rifle of Red Hand cracked, and the bullet striking the gold-piece fair, sent it whizzing away; but keen eyes followed it, and when handed to the lieutenant it was found to have been shattered by the shot.

"You is a terror, ole man; an' I guesses I was mistook in yer, arter all; but I'd like ter see the bottle-shootin' I has heerd tell on," persisted Bill Dead-Eye, and a score of voices seconding the proposal, two bottles were brought, and the two hunters took their stands thirty paces apart.

Placing each a bottle upon his head and steadyng it there, they raised their rifles without the tremor of a nerve, or an instant's hesitation.

Together, like one shot, the rifles flashed and each bottle was shivered to atoms, while a wild shout of admiration went up from the band of agents, and a clapping of hands near by caused all to turn their eyes in the direction of the sound.

There stood Firefly, and the Indian woman, Minna, with the deformed negro in the rear.

Unperceived the three had approached, Afric having told the young girl and her Indian guardian that two strange old hunters had joined the band.

Seeing the fair prisoner, Fancy Fred stepped toward her, touching his slouch hat politely as he advanced, and saying:

"We are enjoying the sight of some rare skill in shooting; those two old men are miraculous shots, and it is no wonder that the Indians, and in fact whites, regard them with terror."

"I saw their last shot, and admired it; I would not hesitate to let them shoot an object from off my head," said Firefly, fearlessly, at the same time gazing into the face of the reckless young officer, to see if she could read hope of succor there.

"If ther lady will trust me, I'll make a better shot for her," said Red Hand, approaching, having heard Firefly's remark.

"Willingly; what will it be?" asked the maiden, and she looked steadily in the face of the old hunter.

"Has any o' these pilgrims got a seegar?" asked Red Hand, turning to the crowd.

"I will oblige you," and Fancy Fred handed a small cigar to Red Hand.

"Now I wants a match. Miss, you do ther smokin' and I'll do ther shootin'; that is, ef yer ain't afeerd ter draw on ther weed."

"Oh no, I have often smoked a cigarette," and placing the cigar between her lips she lighted.

"Now, jist stan' whar I put yer, miss, an' I'll

knock the ashes off o' the eend with my revolver at fifteen paces."

Fancy Fred wished to raise an objection, and the Indian woman said it must not be, but Firefly cried:

"He shall make the shot, for I am not afraid."

"No, Minna will prevent," answered the woman.

"Shet up yer tongue-trap, yer chinnin' red-skin squaw, or I'll shoot holes in yer years fer year-rings," angrily said Red Hand, and the threat seemed to alarm her, for she remained silent, but an evil glitter in her eyes boded no good for the old hunter.

Leading Firefly to the distance of fifteen paces, Red Hand said:

"Now stan' jist heur, leetle gal, an' hold still as cold meat arter a scrimmage; thar, I want yer ter be sideways ter me," and, as though anxious to place her in a position in every way suitable, he remained an instant, while, from under his gray beard came the words:

"We are your friends; be on the alert, for we have come to save you."

The blood rushed into the maiden's face, for from the first she had suspected the two old men, after the letter of the morning; but she did not lose her nerve, and remained standing like a statue as the man stepped off his fifteen paces, wheeled, drew a revolver from his belt, and called out:

"Steady, gal!"

Again did Fancy Fred, to whom Minna had been talking, step forward to interfere; but he was too late, for the weapon was thrust forward, then a report followed, and a shower of sparks flew from the end of the cigar, while yells of admiration for Firefly's nerve and Red Hand's shooting went up on all sides.

"Didn't I say we were some, pards? Does yer doubt us now, yer one-eyed catamount? Ef yer does, jist give us a mount'in to upset, a tree ter chaw up, a grizzly ter tackle, or a barrel o' tanglefoot ter surround; we is ther infants as kin do it, for we is buckskin gloves as will fit, so try us on, by Jeehosephat?" and Old Solitary danced around as though he was anxious for a row, which no one of the agents seemed to desire with men who had just given such an exhibition of their skill in the use of firearms.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FIREFLY RECEIVES VISITORS.

Two days passed away in the outlaw camp, and yet no opportunity had presented itself to the two old hunters—one of whom had made known to Firefly that they were her friends—to attempt a rescue.

In those two days the strange old men had become prime favorites with the road-agents, who seemed delighted with their stories of thrilling adventure in the Rocky Mountains, and were never tired of seeing exhibitions of their skill with the rifle.

The third day of their stay at the stronghold, and toward the afternoon, a messenger came with word from the Black Captain to his lieutenant to halt the stage-coach when it came through, as another gold-box was on board.

"Thet durned Iron Heart will be along I'm thinkin'," remarked one, who had been in the last two attacks, and had met the King of Fate on those occasions.

"No, he are laid up, sick, at ther Refuge Hotel in the Gulch; besides the returnin' hour fer ther stage has been changed to two hours earlier, an' thet durned Hank Holbrook won't know as we knows this," announced Bad Bob, who was the messenger.

"Waal, ef ther capt'in orders it, I suppose we must; but, he keeps shy hisself, as he tells ther loot'nent ter do ther job."

"Fancy Fred are a good man, ef he don't wear a mask," retorted another bandit, and they were separating to prepare for the work ahead when Red Hand came up.

"Hullo, ole man, yer is jist in time; we has a job fer yer ter help in, fer we're guine ter tap ther ole hearse ag'in ter-day, as she goes b'ilin' fer Good Man's Gulch," said one.

"I are willin'; gold dust are becomin' ter my style o' beauty."

"Then you are with us, ole man?"

"You kin gamble on it; when does ther funeral begin?"

"In half a hour we leave camp."

"That are lovely; I'll jist shake up Ole Solitary an' then git up ter ther capt'in's cabing arter thet monkey-shaped nigger, who is a-mendin' my weepins an' a-runnin' me some bullets; but I'll be thar, so don't wait, ef we is a trifle late," and Red Hand went to the cabin where he and Old Solitary made their home, and calling to his comrade to accompany him the two set off for the Head-quarters, as the home of the Black Captain was called.

Arriving there they found Firefly seated in the shade of the veranda, listlessly gazing into vacancy, while an anxious look rested upon her face.

Near her Minna was seated upon a bearskin, and the huge, deformed negro, Afric, lay asleep upon the grass a few feet distant.

The Indian woman scowled as the two old men approached, but Firefly greeted them ple-

santly, while Afric arose to a sitting position. It was evident that neither he nor the Indian woman were pleased with the visit of the new additions to the road-agents' band.

"Waal, how is yer up at Head-quarters ter-day?" asked Red Hand, as the two approached.

"Pretty well, thank you, but tired of this life," answered Firefly, significantly.

"It hain't very lively like, an' we jist comed up fer a little chat, this pesky fine arternoon; but thet red Injun squaw, an' ther black nigger imp, don't seem so almighty delighted at seein' of us," was Red Hand's view of the case.

"This is the captain's quarters, and none of the men come here, except on business," replied the negro, bluntly, while Minna added:

"Yes, the chief does not allow it; you must go."

"Waal, I declar', if I ever seen sich unpolite varmints! I didn't come ter see you, ye two howlin' black an' cinnamon b'ars; I comed ter see this leetle gal, durn yer," and Red Hand cast a quick glance around him as though meditating some sudden act, while Afric, enraged at the conduct of the two new allies, sprung to his feet and advanced toward them.

"Say, yer w'u'dn't harm two ole men, w'u'd yer, nigger?" asked Old Solitary, as though alarmed, and he backed over toward the Indian woman as though for protection.

But, unheeding his words, the negro, whose giant strength had never met its match, advanced the more rapidly upon Red Hand, as though not to give him time to draw a weapon.

Another sweeping glance the old hunter cast around him, and seeing none of the agents in sight, with the leap of a tiger upon its prey, he met the negro half-way, seized him in a clutch of superhuman strength and bore him to the earth, when a fierce struggle followed.

At the same moment Old Solitary had wheel-ed and seized the Indian woman, and before she was aware of danger his hand was upon her throat with a force that prevented any out-cry.

Out from his pocket then he quickly drew a small rope, and, now fully aware of the daring attempt to rescue her in broad daylight, within call and view of the outlaw cabins, Firefly aided in the good work, and in a moment's time Minna was securely bound and gagged.

"I'll drop her jist inside ther winder," said Old Solitary, and he raised the woman and placed her through the open window into the room of the Black Captain.

In the mean time a savage struggle was going on between Red Hand and the desperate negro Afric, who seemed amazed and wild with rage at his inability to crush his adversary in his arms, as he had many another brave and powerful man.

But, in spite of his iron-gray hair and beard and tottering steps, Afric had found in Red Hand his master, for, into the huge, deformed body, crushing through flesh, bone and muscle, the long knife of the old hunter went straight to the negro's heart.

A stifled groan, a shiver, a writhing in death-agony, and Afric, the deformed negro giant, was dead.

"He were a hard one," said Red Hand, and raising the form in his arms he thrust it through the open window as Old Solitary had done the Indian woman.

"Now, my gal, you must git out o' thi'; hain't ther no wardrobe yer kin git on?" asked Red Hand.

"Yes, a suit of the Lieutenant Ninez, who was killed some days ago, poor fellow."

"Good as corn-juice. I guesses yer'd beter see ef yer c'u'd git a rough suit, so as it w'u'n't look onnat'r'l like, as we'll hev ter run under some eyes."

"I'll disguise myself as well as possible," and Firefly left the room, while Red Hand and Old Solitary hastily began a survey of all that was in the apartment, though the iron box ws too strong for them to open.

Before they thought she could be half eady, Firefly returned, rigged out in boots, breeches and shirt of the Lieutenant Ninez, and wearin' upon her head a large slouch hat that shaded her features.

"I have my rifle and belt of arms, too which had been taken from me," she informe them, and the three, dreading every momen of delay, quickly left the cabin, and starte in the direction of the cavern pass, guarded y Misar Ben.

But seeing several horsemen coming from that direction they were compelled t change their course, skirting the cabins, an' heading for what was known as the chasm-pass, and which led out upon the main stage rod.

"We'll doubtless meet ther guar thar, but he are but one, and ef we does meetther gang as hes gone ter rob ther stage-coach why, we'll hev ter fight, that's all," declared Red Hand, and having, during his stay in the stronghold, acquainted himself with the localists, he easily led the way by a circuitous rou' that kept them out of sight of the homes of ae outlaws, and brought them out near the chasm pass.

As they had expected the guardwas on duty; but Red Hand and Old Solitary, leaving Firefly to follow, walked boldly up toim.

"Ther boys was a-wantin' yerer hurry up,

ole pard, ef yer wants ter be in at ther b'ilin', " the guard announced.

"We is a-hurryin', pard; only ther' is a messenger as hes come from ther Gulch, an' wants ter see ther loot'nent; come here, young feller!" and Red Hand called to Firefly, who slowly approached.

"If he hes biz with Fancy Fred, yer'd better take him whar he kin see him," said the guard.

"Is ther' anything wrong with ther capt'in, or town boys, young feller?" he continued.

"No, but I wants ter see ther loot'nent, ef it's all ther same ter you," answered Firefly, disguising her voice and assuming the border dialect with the utmost *sang froid*.

"Waal, we'll not tarry here, pard, fer ther stage will be along, I guesses, afore long," and the two hunters and Firefly walked on, leaving the guard looking after them and muttering:

"Thet young feller's face I hes seen afore; guess he's one o' ther capt'in's spies at ther Gulch."

Owing to the rough nature of the ground, after leaving the pass, the party were compelled to go down through the pine thicket, where the Black Captain had sought refuge the last day of the attack upon the coach, and as they came out into the opening they saw the stage roll into view, and heard the stern order of Fancy Fred to Hank Holbrook to "Halt! and up with your hands!"

"Back! back into the thicket before they see us," shouted Red Hand, dropping his dialect, and pulling Firefly back with him, while Old Solitary quickly followed.

"It will be a durned shame ter let them agints git away with ther box o' gold; what say yer, Solitary?"

"I'm a-thinkin' as you is," was the complacent answer.

"And I, too; can we not prevent it? But see there!" and Firefly pointed to the passengers getting out of the stage-coach.

"It are Colonel Dick Burton, as I live! Waal, I almost feel like lettin' 'em rob him," and Red Hand uttered a light laugh.

But a heavy hand was laid upon his arm, and Old Solitary cried hoarsely:

"Look! it is the girl!"

As he spoke a maiden was seen to get out of the coach, politely aided by Colonel Burton.

"Girl, you stay here and lie low! Come!" cried Red Hand, and he bounded forward, followed by Old Solitary, and by Firefly, too, for hers was not a nature to shrink from any danger when she could be of aid to those in misfortune.

So intent were Fancy Fred and his agents upon the work before them, that they failed to notice the coming of Red Hand and his friends, until they dashed into their midst and leveled their weapons upon them, while the old hunter yelled in trumpet tones:

"Hold!"

The agents shrunk momentarily back, Hank Holbrook gave a whoop and drew his revolvers, an example which several of the passengers followed, even to the young girl who stood by the side of Colonel Dick Burton.

Thus was a thrilling and deadly picture or tableau presented for one moment, Red Hand, Old Solitary and Firefly with their weapons leveled at the hearts of the outlaws who confronted them, and backed by the Prince of Ribbons and the passengers, ready to contest the matter then and there to the bitter end.

"Traitor! What means this outrage?" broke from the lips of Fancy Fred, whose heart was covered by a deadly aim.

"It means that we stand here on equal terms, pard, an' I says yer sha'n't rob ther ole hearse; does yer wish to try it on?" demanded Red Hand, with painful distinctness to those who listened.

"In the devil's name who are you?" cried Fancy Fred, who, in spite of his half-dozen men at his back, felt that the advantage was not on his side.

To his question Red Hand laughed lightly, but made no reply, and the outlaw lieutenant repeated it:

"In Satan's name, I ask, who are you?"

Instantly there was a change in Red Hand; his bent form towered upward; his hand was raised quickly to his face, the act displacing his hat, and long gray wig and beard, while in ringing tones he answered:

"Men call me the King of Fate!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SPECTER HORSEMAN.

THE scene that followed the startling announcement of Iron Heart, the King of Fate, and that in the old hunter, Red Hand, the outlaws had entertained that remarkable man, beggars description, for the road-agents shrunk back, coweringly, before the one, whose deadly aim they knew but too well, and the passengers, who had heard of the deeds of the Dashing Dandy, cheered, while Hank Holbrook fairly howled with delight.

But, in the confusion that ensued, Fancy Fred managed to get a silver whistle to his mouth, and blew one long, shrill call, a signal to the re-

mainder of his outlaws, who were stationed a quarter of a mile up and down the road to prevent surprise, and instantly came an answer.

That a desperate encounter was imminent, none doubted, for the agents, backed by their overwhelming numbers, were willing to make a daring effort to capture the gold-box, and, at the same time, kill, or get into their power, the redoubtable King of Fate, and they only waited the coming of their comrades to begin the attack, fully confident of the advantage they held.

As though knowing that the fight must be both fierce and long, Iron Heart motioned to Firefly and the other maiden to get into the stage, so that Hank could drive on with them out of danger.

But, neither Firefly nor the young girl, who was a passenger in the coach, were made of that kind of material, and Hank called out:

"Nary drive on for me, pard; petticoats and breeches must share ther pow-wow tergether."

"Perhaps we can compromise," came in the bland tones of Colonel Dick Burton.

"As how, pray?" asked Fancy Fred.

"Why, let you have the gold-box, and the passengers go on in the coach, unmolested."

"Leaving this man my prisoner?" and Fancy Fred pointed to Iron Heart, who promptly said:

"If I thought by giving myself up, that the safety of those I would risk my life to save, would be guaranteed, I would gladly do so; but I know the Black Captain and his infamous band too well to trust them on oath, so we will fight it out, and those outlaws not killed we will hang."

"You speak with too much confidence, my fine fellow," sneered Fancy Fred.

"I know the material we have to fight. Ready, all!"

Instantly there was a stir, for all knew that the fight must begin at once; but, as Iron Heart's revolver covered the heart of Fancy Fred, no outlaw dare commence the firing.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

The wild, mocking laughter that fell upon every ear caused all to start, and turn in the direction from whence the strange sound came.

The evening shadows were creeping on, and there, outlined against the dark-green background of the pine thicket, and standing across the grave of Ninez, the outlaw lieutenant, was what appeared to be a marble statue.

White as snow was the horse, and in snowy raiment, from head to foot, was the rider, and both as motionless as the dead.

But, all who had once seen that face and form knew it; it was Ninez, the lieutenant of the road-agents!

"Ha! ha! ha!" again came the mocking laughter, bursting from the lips in ringing peals, just as the two bodies of outlaw reinforcements appeared in sight, up and down the mountain road.

And they, too, heard the derisive laughter, and came to a sudden halt, gazing upon the specter above the grave, a ghostly form of horse and rider appearing ere the sun had gone down beyond the mountain.

Again, and for the third time, the shrill laugh echoed through the forest, and the arms moved, the left pointing in the direction of the chasm pass, the right down into the open grave, with its human bones, from which every atom of flesh had been torn by the sharp teeth of the ravenous wolves.

This silent rebuke at the way his comrades had left him to wild beasts, and the arm pointed toward their stronghold, as though commanding flight, was too much for the superstitious ideas of those wild men, crime-stained though they were, and as one man they turned to fly.

"Ha! ha! ha!" again pealed forth the weird laughter, and away bounded the horse and rider through the forest, and around the mountain-side—those that listened hearing no sound of heavy hoof-fall as the animal sped along.

"Waal, I'm dead beat, I sw'ar," said Hank Holbrook, drawing a long breath, and he added:

"At ther drop o' a hat, I'd git out o' this as

peert as did them agints; oh, Lordy, how they did light out!"

Seeing that his words made no impression upon his hearers, all of whom, even Iron Heart, seemed dazed, he continued:

"Oh, durn it, why don't some o' yer laugh, or I'll go clean mad, an' won't hev far ter go, nuther."

"Can you explain that apparition?" suddenly asked Colonel Burton, turning to Iron Heart.

"Upon my honor I cannot. At the last attack upon this coach, I killed the young man, whose specter form we just beheld. I do not believe in the dead coming back to walk the earth in spirit, but this is beyond my comprehension," answered Iron Heart, impressively.

"And mine, too; but come; let us return to Good Man's Gulch," and Old Solitary threw aside the disguise he wore, revealing the handsome, determined face of Major Hugh Tarleton.

"Waal, ef yer don't lay over me, I are a liar; but yonder comes ther speerit back ag'in, and I is goin' ter stampede," cried Hank Holbrook.

But the one he believed to be the returning

specter dashed into sight, and proved to be Will Cody, the Pony Express Rider.

As he drew rein it was seen that he was very pale, and upon his face rested an anxious look.

"Hullo! Been halted again?" he asked, as he rode up.

"Yas, an' ther'd been rails ter split in ther mount'in, pard, ef a speerit spook hadn't put in an appearance."

"Did you see it, too?" asked Will Cody, in surprise.

"Well, I'm thinkin' we did, or we is all liars, gals an' all; an' you got a glimpse o' ther ghost critter, did yer, Prince?"

"Yes, Hank: it passed me in Deadman's Trace—went by me like a flash of light, and no sound of hoof-beats. I don't go much on spirits, and am not afraid of mankind, but I was scared, I'll admit, and so was my horse; but I must skip on— Hullo, Firefly, is that you? Where are your petticoats?"

"I discarded them to make my escape from the outlaws, and which I owe to these two noble men," said the girl, frankly.

"Permit me to congratulate you, too," remarked Colonel Burton, offering his hand.

"Thank you," was the quiet reply, but the maiden did not take the offered hand.

Hank Holbrook having arranged a part of his misplaced harness, mounted to his box, followed by Iron Heart and Major Tarleton, while Colonel Burton aided the maiden into the coach. Firefly and the other passengers, a couple of miners, springing also in and taking seats, the coach rolled away, the Pony Prince having dashed on ahead.

As he turned the curve Will Cody looked behind him, and instantly he reined his horse back upon his haunches and pointed in the direction from whence they had come.

Hank Holbrook, Iron Heart and the major turned their eyes at the same moment, and from the lips of all broke a cry, which caused those within the coach to look out.

There, a couple of hundred yards behind them, coming on at an easy gallop and silently, was the specter of Ninez the outlaw lieutenant.

"Hold on, Holbrook! Be that specter or human I will know," and Iron Heart endeavored to spring to the ground.

But Major Tarleton seized him firmly, and the now thoroughly alarmed Prince of the Ribbons uttered a yell that sent his horses forward at full speed, while the keen lash fell mercilessly upon their glossy hides.

Like the wind they flew down the mountain road, the coach swaying wildly, and the Pony Prince barely able to keep his place in advance.

And never before had the loafers around the Traveler's Refuge seen Hank Holbrook come in in that mad style.

"He's got ther agents arter him," cried one.

"Or ther devil," suggested another.

"Maybe he's drunk," remarked a more practical personage, and they gathered around the coach as it drove up, the more bewildered as they beheld Iron Heart, Major Tarleton and Firefly in their strange disguises.

But, no one seemed willing to vouch any explanation, not even the Pony Prince, who had thrown his express bag into the office and gone silently into the hotel.

"Hank, have you a lady passenger by the name of Miss Westfield?" asked Jim Smith the landlord.

"Yas, thar she is."

"Well, I have a letter for her, left by Judge Wharton; please drive her to his ranch."

"All right, Jim. Colonel, shall I drop you at your home?"

"Yes, Hank, after I have escorted Miss Westfield to her destination."

Both Iron Heart and Major Tarleton heard the remark, as they were entering the hotel, and the former said:

"It is unfortunate that she should have returned in the stage with that man. Come, Firefly, as soon as I have gotten out of this to-gerry of an old hunter I will see you to your home," and the three entered the hotel just as night settled down upon the little valley.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IRON HEART MAKES TWO CALLS.

THE morning after the scenes related in the foregoing chapter Iron Heart mounted his horse, determined to pay two visits.

The first one was to the ranch of Firefly, which was situated upon the slope of the mountain, in the rear of the hamlet, or town-city, as some proudly called it—of Good Man's Gulch, which, in its palmiest days, did not boast of a population of over fifteen hundred souls, three hundred of those being Chinese, eight hundred of the remainder consisting of miners, hard working but rough, wild fellows, and the balance, excepting a few women and children, consisting of the harpies that prey upon a mining town, from gamblers to cutthroats.

One passably well-built street, a score of stores, selling every kind of goods, from buttons to revolvers, several hotels, of which the Traveler's Refuge was the best, two-score of saloons and gambling hells, of which the Satan's Dominion was the "bright particular

Dashing Dandy.

star," the Pony Express office, stage-coach stables and head-quarters and "gold exchange" made up this wild border town in the heart of the gold regions.

And yet, with all its rough element, there was an air of refinement there in a few homes, and men, who would be ornaments to any society, walked its streets, brought by adversity to seek new fortunes in the gold mines of the West.

As Iron Heart rode slowly through the main street that morning, he was musing upon the strange scenes and people around him, and the circumstances that had brought most of them there.

"Nearly every man—and woman too, for that matter—has a history in their lives; some skeleton in the closet has driven many of them here, for all did not come to seek for gold; Colonel Burton, for instance, Arthur Vancourt, and even the Black Captain, who, men say, is worth millions."

"Then, Will Cody, and Steel Grip, Lasso Dan, and that strange man, Vagabond Luke; then Firefly, and Dave Westfield, too, have histories. How strange is it all! Ah me, I wish the bitter end had come for me, and it will, soon, for the object that brought me here is all that I live for now."

So musing to himself Iron Heart rode on, passed out of the town, and took the road leading to the Lennox Ranch, or as it was generally called, Firefly's Home.

It was a pleasant cabin abode of five rooms, strongly built of logs, and the immediate grounds about the house surrounded by a stockade fence.

Chickens, ducks and geese stalked about the yard, and off on the hillside roamed a few hundred cattle, sheep and horses, while an air of prosperity was upon all, for flowering vines climbed the veranda posts, and flowers were numerously planted about the beds on each side of the walk from the gate.

An old negro man was busy working in the garden, and a negress was washing clothes.

All this did Iron Heart take in at a glance, as he walked toward the cabin, having hitched his horse to the fence.

Then his eyes fell upon the fair young owner of this pleasant home, seated at the window, sewing.

She arose as she caught sight of him, and came forward with a glad welcome, looking strangely beautiful in her morning wrapper of some light, white material, and a red rosebud in her hair, and another at her throat.

"It was kind of you to come so soon, and now I can thank you for all you have done for poor me," she said, the dashing, fearless, reckless Firefly suddenly metamorphosed into the lovely and noble woman she really was.

"I wished to see how you were after all you had gone through," responded Iron Heart, unable to restrain his admiring gaze, and almost startled by her beauty.

"Oh, nothing ever hurts me; I am a real mountain and prairie girl, you know."

"Yes, but then the suspense you endured while in the Black Captain's power must have been terrible."

"Yes, after you arrived, for I was in dread that you would be detected and shot; but I kept up a stout heart, for I believed I would escape, and could have done so had it not been for Minna, whom the major had to treat rather rudely. I wonder how she is?"

"Having no interest in her I do not care; but I believe the Black Captain will make an effort to get you again into his power, and I wish to ask you if you will take three of my friends as boarders for a while?"

"Your friends are always welcome, Captain Iron Heart."

"Thank you. I will send them up to-day; they are good men all of them, and you can trust them implicitly."

"Who are they?"

"Two of them you doubtless know, for they answer to the names of Lasso Dan and Steel Grip; the other is a scout, and is known as Lem Brigham; give them a room at night and they will be content."

"Willingly; and it is so kind of you to wish me to have protectors; but I am not one to faint at sight of danger, and always go armed."

"I know your nerve; but you are yet a woman, and unable to cope with cruel men. Now I must go, but let no one know that you have protectors, for they will come after dark and leave early in the morning."

"Must you return to town so soon?"

"No, I am going to Judge Wharton's ranch."

"Ah! he has a lovely daughter," and there was a tinge of jealousy in Firefly's tone.

"Were I in search of lovely women I would remain here," was the gallant reply; "but I go to see the young lady who was with us in the coach yesterday," he added.

"Oh yes; she, too, is very beautiful; and you know her then?" and again there was an anxious look in the lovely eyes.

"Oh yes; I know her well."

"Yet you did not speak to her yesterday, nor she to you."

"No; there was a motive for not doing so."

"Have you heard more of the specter?" asked Firefly, as though to change the subject.

"No, but I will yet solve the mystery."

"Beware! That horse and rider were not of this world."

"You, too, superstitious?"

"Not by nature; but it was something that none of us could understand."

"True, and that is why I will trail the mystery to the end; but, good-by," and the two parted, Firefly to pace up and down the veranda for a long time, lost in deep thought, and Iron Heart to continue on his way to the ranch of Judge Wharton.

As he rode up, he saw a saddle horse hitched in the yard; but the judge met him with a kindly greeting and ushered him into the house, where, to his surprise, he beheld Colonel Dick Burton, seated on the sofa with Leone Westfield, while Alice Wharton sat near by.

"My daughter, you know, Captain Iron Heart, and your fair protégée, Miss Westfield, you also of course know; but, have you ever met Colonel Richard Burton?—ah yes, how absent-minded I am; I remember now, you and the colonel have met before. Be seated, sir, be seated; and, Alice, bid Ching Lung to bring me in a bottle of Otard brandy; and, by the way, daughter, tell him I'll draw the cork, for if he does it, he'll get so drunk he'll never do another thing this blessed day. A drunken Christian I can endure, gentlemen, but an intoxicated Heathen Chinese I always pass on. Does your wife like Chinese help, Captain Iron Heart; or perhaps you are not married?" and the judge had barely taken breath in all that he said.

"No, I am a bachelor," quietly said Iron Heart, and then, turning to Colonel Burton, he continued:

"It is a surprise to meet you here, colonel."

"Doubtless, as I seldom visit any one; but, having been fellow-passenger with Miss Westfield all the way from Denver, I called to see how she was, after her alarm of yesterday."

"And I called for the same purpose."

"Indeed! I did not know that you were acquainted with the lady?" and the colonel showed his surprise.

"Oh yes; but in my disguise, assumed to rescue Firefly from that accursed Black Captain, Miss Westfield did not appear to recognize me; but, have you arrived at a solution of the spectral mystery yet, Colonel Burton?"

"None, sir, nor has Miss Westfield. He certainly was most kind to interfere in our behalf."

"Yes, but Hank Holbrook drove off this morning with his heart in his throat; brave as he is, and friendly as the spirit seemed, he dreaded to meet it again."

"I don't wonder at it," and before more could be said Ching Lung entered with the brandy and glasses, the cork already drawn and considerable missing from the bottle.

"Me spilles littie brandee," he volunteered, seeing the judge look at him with frowning face.

"Yes, downee your yelles throatee," mimicked the judge, and the conversation became general, until Iron Heart arose to leave, and the colonel, also rising, said he would accompany him.

Ten minutes after these two men rode up to the door of the Traveler's Refuge and dismounted, to the great surprise of all who saw them together, for they felt that there was no love lost between them.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SPECTER OF THE MOUNTAIN.

"I TELL yer, pards, my checks will soon be called in; I know it, and Hank Holbrook heaved a sigh, as he dismounted from his box before the door of the Traveler's Refuge, the third day after the rescue of Firefly from the stronghold of the road-agents.

"What news now, Hank?" asked Jim Smith, the landlord, who heard the remark.

"News enough."

"Hev yer seen ther spook ag'in?" asked a loafer, in a half-whisper of awe.

"Seen it? Why, in course I hes seen it! I allus does, goin' an' comin'," answered Hank.

"What does it do, Hank?" asked Jim Smith.

"Wait until I see a leetle other kind o' speerit an' I'll tell yer," answered the Prince of the Ribbons, moving toward the bar, while the stablemen in waiting led the horses away to the yard.

"T'her agents didn't bother yer, too, this trip, Hank?" inquired an idler, who, with the crowd, had followed the driver into the bar.

"Nary! They lays low, for they is as skeer o' ther speerit as I is, an' so is everybody else but that King o' Fate whom I met back on ther road."

"Whar was he a-goin'?" was the question from a dozen.

"Arter ther speerit!"

"Oh, he ar' some; but he'd better not tackle a ghost," warned one.

"Waal, he thinks dif'rent, for he's gone ter do so, all ther same."

"Tell us about it, Hank," cried the crowd.

"All right; a leetle more o' this speerit, Fred, that I are acquainted with—thar, my boy, that

will form a coatin' fer my stomick, seein' as ther weather is gittin' breezy. Now, pards, yer must know that on each trip I has been, since ther last attack o' ther agents, I bes met ther speerit, for, in goin' over, he comes out ahind me at ther Vigilantes' Tree, and in a easy gallop, or fast, jist as I go, he keeps about fifty paces away, until I gits ter Dead Man's Trace, an' thar he leaves me an' goes inter ther woods."

"An' yer sees him distinct, Hank?"

"As distincter as I sees you now, an' it are certain ther outlaw loot'nent—they called him Ninez, I b'lieves—only he are rigged out all in white an' his horse are like snow an' don't make no racket when he gits over ther groun'. On ther right side o' ther speerit's face is a wound, an' out o' it ther blood has run down upon ther clothes an' horse, an' it don't look right."

I tell yer, pards, them outlaws didn't bury that young feller, an' ther coyotes dug him up, an' he are a-hauntin' 'em for it; but what I hez done for him ter ha'nt me, I doesn't know."

"It wor Iron Heart that shot him, wasn't it, Hank?"

"Waal, yas, he has pluck uncommon ter go a-huntin' of ther feller arter he has kilt him."

"Hehes, fer a fact, pards; but, he are no common man; but I knows what I is goin' ter do, an' ther stage boss says I can, so I will start ter-night."

"Hain't goin' ter give ther route up, Hank?"

"Nary. Only I'm a-goin' ter drive ther road at night, fer a trip or two."

"But, all speerits come out at night."

"Yas, but this loot'nent's speerit is what skeers me, an' I sees him in ther daytime, so I'll run ther trip at night, an' I starts this evenin' at nine o'clock."

"An' ef yer see ther spook ter-night, Hank?"

"Then I'll be all broke up, for sartin. Come, fellers, let's liquor up, fer I needs a firm foundation."

"Upon the principle of spirits to the spirits, Hank; but, by the way, have you a seat in the hearse for to-night?" and Colonel Burton approached, having heard the conversation.

"I'spects ter bev nine inside, colonel, ter folks hain't travelin' much sin' ther speerit's been seen."

"Then I'll ride with you to night, on the box, for I wish to see what account my repeating rifle will give of this ghost on horseback."

All were surprised at the reckless courage of Colonel Burton, who would dare to turn his rifle upon one from the spirit land, and Hank Holbrook did not half like the idea; but he said little, and at nine o'clock that night the stage rolled away from the door of the Traveler's Refuge, and began its perilous trip across the haunted mountain, or, as it had been called in the early settlement of Good Man's Gulch, Madman's Mountain, having gained the name from the fact that a giant madman had often been seen in its wilds, who drove all away who attempted an exploration of its hidden wealth.

"There be some deep mystery in that mountain, pards, for years ago it war a madman as dwelt there on the other side toward Dead Man's Trace, whar hem five graves is that nobody knows anything about; then it were ther road-agents as held ther top o' it, an' now it's haunted by a speerit an' a spook horse. I tell yer that's somethin' wrong, an' I is goin' ter l'quor up, er I'll be afeerd ter go to my cabin. Who'll jine me?"

The whole crowd "jined him," for the "speerits" of the Refuge bar were not the kind they feared, and many a wild story was told of Madman's Mountain, and many a story that had its origin only in the imaginative brain of some Good Man's Gulch miner.

"Ef ther speerit is ter be squelched, ther's two men as kin do it, and them two is on his trail, an' they is Devil Dick Burton, an' ther King o' Fate."

This opinion seemed general, and hoping for thrilling news in the morning, the party were about to separate, when a tall form entered, and approaching the bar said, simply:

"Brandy. Fred."

It was given him, and he walked away to his room, leaving a queer sensation behind him, for the man was Iron Heart, and his handsome clothing was travel-stained, and his face pale and weary-looking.

"He has see'd ther speerit, an' ther he's been a bu'stin' time," was the comment of an old miner, and the crowd dispersed, all filled with superstitious awe.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HANK HOLBROOK'S STORY.

The morning after the return of Iron Heart to the Traveler's Refuge, he arose and appeared in the breakfast-room as fresh looking as though he had not returned at a late hour the night before from "spirit-hunting," as Hank Holbrook had said was his mission into Madman's Mountain.

Dressed with unusual care, in velvet sack-coat and white corduroy pants stuck in the top of his stylish boots and with a new light sombrero, he looked indeed like a dandy, and a dashing one, too, when one glared into his smooth-shaven face and fearless eyes.

"Hank says you were ghost-hunting last night, captain; did you see the specter horseman?" asked Jim Smith, who was taking his brandy cocktail when Iron Heart came out of his room.

"Yes."

"Indeed! was it really a ghost?"

"So I found it," and, as if to avoid conversation on the subject, Iron Heart continued: "Please order my horse around for me as soon as I have finished breakfast; and, by the way, when will the Prince of the Ribbons return?"

"He drove the trip last night and returns to-night; what is it, Ling Chi?" and Jim Smith turned to an excited Chinaman.

"Melican man Hankee come now; stagee come quickee," cried Ling Chi, pointing out of the door.

Hastening to the veranda Iron Heart and Jim Smith beheld the stage coming rapidly up the street, and the next moment it was at the door, and Hank Holbrook, white and haggard, sprung from the box.

"Where is the colonel, Hank?" called out the landlord.

"I dropped him at the cross-roads and he walked home."

"Did you kill ther ghost?"

"He are already dead, pard; that thing hain't human," returned the driver, in a low voice.

"You saw the spirit, then?" persisted Jim Smith.

"Yas, an' want ter see some of another kind now—some I kin rattle with, for I'm played," and calling to Iron Heart and the landlord to follow he sought the bar, and dashed off as he expressed it, "five fingers straight to boost me up, pard's."

"And you saw the ghost again?"

"Yas, landlord o' this hash-factory, I seen ther ghost ag'in; he are a night ghost as well as a day one, an' he jest laughs at shootin'-irons. Yer see, arter passin' ther Vigilantes' Tree, we, that is ther colonel an' me, heerd a laugh ahind us, an' lookin' back we see'd ther speerit gallopin' along on his spook horse.

"Wait till we git to ther openin' on ther mountain, Hank, an' then draw up sudden, an' I'll gi' him a shot for luck," says ther colonel ter me, an' he fingers that repeatin'-rifle o' hisn."

"You is ther doctor, colonel," says I, an' on we went, till we come to ther place whar that loot'nent were kilt by you, Capt'in Iron Heart, an' ther colonel says, says he:

"Now!"

"I dragged ther critters to a dead still, an' ther colonel turned an' blazed away, standing up on ther dash ter git good aim.

"Waal, ther speerit laughed at us, an' ther colonel fired ag'in an' ag'in until he hed shot ther weepin' out, an' still that speerit sot on his spook horse an' laughed.

"Drive on, Hank, an' drive like Hell!" yells ther colonel; but I was a-goin', an' it wa'n't no use ter tell me, for I was a-layin' on ther persuader until ther critters was mad with fear, an' a-b'ilin' along like greased lightnin'; but, right thar behind come ther speerit, and thar he kept till we got to Dead Man's Trace, an' thar he drawed off inter ther timber.

"Waal, thar were no sleep for me, when I got to t'other end o' my road, an' says I:

"Colonel, let's return immediate, an' we'll pass Dead Man's Trace about sun up."

Says he: "All right, Hank."

An' so we started back, an' we passed ther Trace an' didn't see no speerit, an' begun climbin' ther mount'in, an' yet didn't see no speerit; so ther colonel says, says he:

"I guesses I wounded ther speerit, or kilt him, Hank."

"I guesses not," says I, an' I looked at ther colonel in pity, an' I war right, for on ther mountain side, whar ther road-agents attacked us, an' stan'in' right across his own grave, were ther speerit, spook horse an' all, an' ther colonel didn't shoot at him, nuther; but he laughed thar same wild laugh at us, an' ef yer looks at my critters you will see they hain't been long comin' from thar here; let's hev another beverage, Fred," and Hank dashed off another "five fingers," while Iron Heart went in to join Major Tarleton at breakfast.

After finishing their meal the two friends, for such they had now become, mounted their horses and rode away from the hotel together, going up the mountain road to the north, in the direction of the cavern of Ill-omen Luke.

A shrill signal, given near the tall tree, soon brought an answer, and nimbly down the pine came Vagabond Luke, who approached and said, with an air of politeness that seemed natural to him:

"Good-morning, gentlemen."

Both acknowledged the salute, and Iron Heart said:

"Can you leave your prisoners safely, to-night, you and the Indian?"

"Certainly! can I serve you?"

"Yes, you and Warrior meet me at the Creek Canyon to-night at ten, and come well armed."

"We will be there, sir."

Iron Heart and the major then rode on, the former leading the way, and taking a path that

wound around the base of the mountain to the home of Firefly.

Finding the maiden away from home, they made the circuit of the town, and were riding through a canyon that led out upon the highway near the ranch of Judge Wharton, when they heard the sharp crack of a rifle, followed by a loud shriek.

Putting spurs to their horses, they came upon a strange scene.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A GIRL'S DEATH-SHOT.

A SHORT while before the stage-coach dashed into Good Man's Gulch, with the Prince of the Ribbons holding the reins, and white and nervous after his and Colonel Burton's night adventure with the specter horseman of Madman's Mountain, an old woman was tottering along the highway leading to the ranch of Judge Wharton.

Her form seemed bent with age, and she carried a stick in her right hand.

Turning into the walk, leading to the Wharton cabin, the old woman walked up to the door and nodded to Leone Westfield, who sat upon the veranda, and who looked exquisitely lovely in the attire of her sex, though her eyes were ever haunted by sad memories of the past.

"My poor woman, are you hungry and tired? You certainly look so, and shall have both food and rest," said Leone, kindly, rising and approaching her.

The woman raised her face partially, the act disclosing a complexion burned to a bronze hue, and eyes strangely bright for one of her age, while, in a voice that trembled, she answered:

"Me hungry an' tired; but me want to find a pale-face girl I look for."

"You are an Indian then. At first I believed you a Gipsy, for you looked like those that were wont to come to my home years ago."

"Me no Gipsy; me red-skin, and me look for a pale-face girl."

"You wish to see Miss Alice Wharton perhaps? but she has ridden out with her father over to the Vancourt Ranch."

"No, me look for girl name Leone Westfield."

The maiden started at hearing her name upon the lips of that old Indian woman; but she answered quietly:

"I am Leone Westfield."

"Me so glad found you; me want you to come with me."

"What can you want with me?" asked Leone, with suspicion in her tone.

"Leone have brother once; he kill man, and run away; bad pale-face chief hang Leone brother, and he is die now and want see you."

"Do you mean that the man who ruined and killed my poor brother Leo is dying and wishes to see me?" asked the maiden, deeply moved.

"Me have straight tongue; bad white chief want tell something before die."

"Where is he, woman?"

"He live yonder—one short walk," and she pointed toward a canyon running into the hills.

"Is he a miner and has a cabin there?"

"The maiden has spoken right."

"And he sent you to me?"

The Indian woman bowed in answer.

"Whom did he say I was to go to see?"

The woman seemed thinking for a moment and then replied:

"Richard Dorsey."

"Enough! I will accompany you, and you shall be well paid for serving me; wait until I get ready."

Going into the house Leone was absent for quite a while, and then she returned with her hat and shawl on.

"Come; let us go at once," she said, and without a word the Indian woman led the way, the maiden following, her face pale and determined, as if she had made some sudden and daring resolution.

A walk of half a mile up to the deserted cabin, and the woman turned into a ravine, darkened by the scrub pines that grew upon the sides.

Dropping her stick she stooped to pick it up, Leone passing her as she did so, and then, with the spring of a panther she was upon the maiden, her lithe arms encircling her slender waist like bands of iron, and her wiry hand dragging from the belt beneath the shawl the revolver and knife concealed there.

One cry only burst from the lips of the poor girl, and then, disarmed, she was powerless in the arms of the woman, whom she now knew was no longer decrepit with age, but young and possessed of remarkable strength and activity.

"Well, traitress, what mean you by this outrage?" cried Leone, still fearless, in spite of the situation in which she was placed.

"The pale-face maiden shall know; she is to die," was the calm answer, and no longer in the hesitating Indian manner, yet with a slight accent.

"Die! how have I ever wronged you?" cried Leone, a thrill of horror passing through her heart.

"Me never saw you before; but you must die; the chief says you must die, and me will kill you," was the cool response, the woman using the word *me* when speaking of herself.

"What chief, woman?"

"Richard Dorsey."

"Oh God! thwarted, and by *him*," and the poor girl buried her face in her hands.

As she thus stood, an object of pitiable grief, there came a sudden change over the Indian woman, for her form dilated, her eyes glittered with evil intent, and drawing a long, keen knife from the folds of her dress, she said, in a harsh tone:

"Let pale-face girl prepare for Happy Hunting-grounds."

The maiden started, and one glance showed her the cruel intent of the woman.

She could not fly, for she stood with her back to a rock, and the woman faced her, cutting off all escape.

Realizing her peril, she did only what was left for her to do—dropped on her knees and raised her hands in pleading:

"Don't kill me!"

"Must; chief told me; good-by," was the merciless response.

Then the knife was lifted, and the feminine fiend sprung toward her victim; but, as she did so, there came the crack of a rifle, and a wild shriek followed.

And that shriek came from the lips of the Indian woman, who fell dead in her tracks.

Then, out of the dark shadow of the ravine came a young girl, and behind her trotted a faithful pony.

In her hand the new-comer held a small rifle, but one of deadly effect, and her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I fired just in time to save you—ha! who have we here?" and wheeling, the young girl stood ready to meet friend or foe.

But those who came were not foes; on the contrary, two as good and true friends as any maidens in distress would wish, for they were none other than the King of Fate and Major Hugh Tarleton.

"Well, this is a scene to come upon, but I rejoice that only the wicked are punished," said Major Tarleton, after the two had dismounted and greeted the maidens, Leone Westfield having recovered her nerve and usual composure with wonderful quickness.

"Ah! it is Minna, the Indian woman, who was your guard at the stronghold, Firefly!" exclaimed Iron Heart, bending over the dead woman.

"I am sorry she fell by my rifle; but, I was yonder in the ravine gathering wild flowers, and saw her threaten the life of this lady, and I fired to save her."

"And you did save me, my noble friend," said Leone, deeply affected.

"Major, I will go back to that miner's cabin up the valley, and send him here to bury this body, while you go on with the ladies to Judge Wharton's, where I will soon join you," and Iron Heart mounted his horse and rode away, while the major and two maidens walked slowly on toward the ranch, Firefly's and the officer's horses following them like hounds.

Arriving at the ranch they found that the judge and his daughter had just returned from their visit to the cattle ranch of Arthur Vancourt, where they had gone to see what had become of the wealthy and handsome rancho, to whom Alice was really attached.

The judge was terribly excited, and Alice in tears, for they had met with an adventure upon their return that well-nigh proved fatal to both father and daughter.

"I will tell you, sir, I will tell you all about it—Sh! here comes Captain Iron Heart, and he, too, shall hear my story. Welcome, captain, welcome! Sit down and let me relate to you an outrage, sir, an outrage perpetrated upon Alice and myself."

"Went to see Vancourt, sir; curse him, say I! and if Alice swore she would curse him, too; as she does not, she weeps away her indignation; yes, sir, as I was saying, we went to his ranch; have not seen him for days; but he was absent, and upon our return, at a lonely place in the mountain, to the north of Good Man's Gulch, I was fired upon from ambush; just think of that, and my horse killed, and a bullet passed through my hat; there, see this hole, sir; well, out from the thicket sprung three men, and ere I could resist, I, sir, I, a man who had been justice of the peace, was dragged from my horse to be murdered, while my daughter was held in durance vile by a ruffian with a pistol.

"Ah, sir, but they found me game, and in the struggle I tore the mask of one of the men off, and—God bless me, sir—it revealed the face of Arthur Vancourt, the cattle-king; but you do not cry out with surprise."

"No, nothing that Arthur Vancourt could do would surprise me," returned Iron Heart, coolly.

"Ah! you know him then? Well, sir, he cried, seeing I had unmasked him:

"You old fool, now you have sealed your doom."

"The idea, sir, me an old fool! but he would have killed me, for he drew a knife, when a shot came from the hillside and my other assailant was killed, while Arthur Vancourt sprung upon his horse, which I saw in the pines, and escaped, along with the fellow who had seized my daughter's horse."

"But who rescued you from your peril, judge?"

"Ah, yes; it was a poor, worthless fellow they call I'll-omen Luke."

"By Heaven, I am glad to hear this," said Iron Heart, earnestly.

"But he is *not* a worthless fellow, father, for he had splendid eyes, and looked as though he was poor and in trouble," spoke up Alice Wharton.

"Judge, that man is not the poor, insignificant person that he is believed to be. So he came to your aid, did he?"

"Yes, and single-handed, too; he spoke a cheering word to Alice, got the horse of the dead ruffian for me, and placed my saddle and bridle on him.

"I offered him money and he refused it indignantly, touched his hat to Alice and walked away; but she rode after him and thanked him for all he had done. Now, sir, shall I push this affair against Arthur Vancourt?"

"Oh, no, judge, leave him to me; but come, major, we must be off," and leaving Firefly to spend the day, at the urgent request of all, Iron Heart and Major Tarleton mounted their horses and returned to Good Man's Gulch.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MIDNIGHT EXPEDITION.

SHORTLY after ten o'clock, on the night following the day on which Firefly made her splendid death-shot, a band of horsemen were assembled on the creek bank above Good Man's Gulch.

All were well armed, well mounted, and, more than a score in number, were a band of men who would dash like a whirlwind over almost any human opposition.

"Ah, here comes Will Cody, the Pony Express Rider," said a deep voice, recognizable as Iron Heart's.

"Now are all here?" he added, as the Pony Prince rode up.

"All, capt'in; we kin go on with ther b'ilin' now," responded Steel Grip, for he and Lasso Dan were along, and also Lem Brigham, Vagabond Luke and Killing Warrior, besides Hank Holbrook and half a score of brave stage-drivers and pony express riders.

"Major Tarleton!"

"I am here, Iron Heart."

"Well, all are ready, so you take your band and enter by Miser Ben's cabin, while I will go through the Chasm Pass. As soon as you gain entrance into the valley, charge at once for the outlaws' cabins, and I will do the same.

"Remember, men, the Black Captain shows no mercy, so fight for your lives and to free this country of that curse, but under *no circumstances* kill the chief, for *he is my game*, and I offer ten thousand dollars for him alive, but nothing for him dead.

"Do all understand?"

"All!"

The sound was deep, ominous and determined.

"March!"

The two bands separated, Iron Heart and his troop, with the Pony Prince as lieutenant, taking the stage road up the mountain, and Major Tarleton and his squad, with Hank Holbrook as his aide, going up the canyon leading to the cabin of Miser Ben.

A rapid ride brought Iron Heart and his companions to the scene of the attacks on the stage-coach, and all eyes were turned in every direction for a sight of the specter horseman; but nowhere was he visible, not even when they passed the grave of Ninez and the outlaws, slain by the King of Fate.

"It are a good omen not to see him," remarked Lasso Dan, in a low tone.

"Don't crow yit, pard; we hain't out o' the woods," warned Steel Grip, and silence again fell upon the party.

Approaching the pass, Iron Heart dismounted and went on ahead.

For an age, it seemed to those in waiting, he was gone, and then they heard his signal to come on.

He was standing directly on the barrier in the pass, and said aloud:

"There is no guard here, or—"

"Or what, capt'in?" asked Steel Grip.

"Or they have discovered our coming in some way and are lying in ambush for us."

"Me go see; me great warrior," complacently said the Indian, Killing Warrior, and he slipped noiselessly away from the party, and disappeared in the gloom.

He was absent quite a while, and returning reported no outlaws near.

Wondering at the strange circumstance, Iron Heart moved forward with his party once more, crossed the plateau, and descended the hill to the valley.

Then a long dark line of horsemen was visible moving in the same direction that they were.

"It is the major and his party; they, too, seem to have met with no opposition," and soon after Iron Heart ceased speaking, the two bands met.

"There was no one in the cabin, captain," the major reported.

"Nor in the Chasm Pass; can they have de-

serted their stronghold, or are they intending to give us a surprise?" asked Iron Heart.

"That we can soon find out."

"Yes; forward all!" and Iron Heart led the way at a gallop directly for the cabin of the Black Captain, and in an instant it was surrounded.

But no light was visible within, and silence and desolation reigned supreme.

Dismounting, Iron Heart and the major approached the door.

"Here is a placard; a light here, please." It was soon struck, and upon the door was visible a sheet of paper firmly tacked.

Upon it, written in a bold, legible hand, was a notice which Iron Heart read aloud:

"To WHOM IT MAY CONCERN!

"Whereas, The Black Captain and his band of road-agents have dissolved copartnership in the business of cutting throats and robbing, it is agreed that this association of mountain toll-gatherers do this night forever separate, and that each and every member hereby agrees to live an honest life, and repent of his past sins."

Then followed the signature of the Black Captain as chief, Fancy Fred as lieutenant, and some thirty names as members of the outlaw band.

A murmur of disappointment went up on all sides; but Iron Heart smiled grimly and said, sternly:

"That man shall never escape me; I have sworn it above the dead."

Then turning to his men, he called out:

"Go through the cabins, boys, and then set them afire."

Eagerly the men obeyed, and soon the whole valley was lurid with the light of the outlaws' quarters.

"Now let us return," came the stern order, and, their way lighted by the red flames, they set off on the return to Good Man's Gulch, going by the Chasm Pass.

As they reached the opening beyond all drew rein suddenly, for above the grave of the outlaw lieutenant was visible the specter horseman, silent as a statue.

"Major, you lead the men back, please, for I will follow yonder phantom, though once before I pursued it for hours without success."

Without another word Iron Heart put spurs to his splendid animal and dashed toward the strange white forms of horse and rider.

An instant the phantom watched his coming, and then glided away down toward the stage-road, into which it turned in the direction of Dead Man's Trace.

But, close in pursuit went the King of Fate, and specter and pursuer disappeared from sight in the gloom.

"Thet man are gone to his doom, pards," declared Hank Holbrook, sadly.

"Or he will solve the mystery of that phantom, and I shall be glad, for it pursues me every time I pass through this mountain," replied the Pony Prince.

"I wish he had not gone," remarked the major.

"So does I."

"Yas, 'tain't right ter fool with speerits."

"Ef any horse kin catch a spook, ther one Iron Heart is a-ridin' kin, an' ef any wan kin 'rastle with a ghost, he's ther feller that will be heerd from," put in Lem Brigham, and giving vent to numerous other expressions the outlaw-hunters rode slowly homeward, deeply impressed by the adventure of the night, and especially a sight of the famous specter of Madman's Mountain.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TRAILING A SPECTER.

WHEN Iron Heart started in pursuit of the flying phantom in the mountain, he did so with a firm determination to run it to ground, be the consequences what they might.

Upon the occasion when Hank Holbrook had seen him looking for the specter, he had not been mounted upon his best horse, and though seeing the strange object, and giving chase to it, he could not come up with it, and had passed hours striving to find where it had gone, after disappearing in a heavy piece of timber growing on the mountain side.

Impressed by a feeling that its appearance and actions were certainly supernatural and ghostly, the Dashing Dandy was yet not a man to be influenced in a great degree by superstition, and made up his mind to solve the mystery regarding the spirit forms of horse and rider.

Mounted upon a steed which he knew had not his superior, in speed and bottom, on the whole border, armed to the teeth, and relying on his own nerve and strength, he swept on after the flying animal, or phantom, in his front, at a pace that proved to him in a short while that he was gaining.

But, as though anxious to keep just such a distance between them, and observing the space lessening, the specter horse rushed forward with renewed effort, and once more held his own.

And thus it went on until the pursuer and pursued swept down into the vale known as Dead Man's Trace, and straight for the five graves went the specter, to suddenly halt upon

them and face the daring man coming so recklessly on.

With outstretched arms the phantom rider sat his ghostly horse; but the King of Fate came on to grapple whatever might confront him, and once more the weird creatures turned in flight down the Trace, and with a speed that momentarily gained on the Dashing Dandy.

Then, as if determined to frighten the bold pursuer off his track, the specter wheeled suddenly, and rode directly back toward the fearless man who dared thus to follow the beings of the shadow-land.

Dashing Dandy saw him coming, heard his wild, mocking laughter, and nerved himself for the meeting, and, strange to say, without drawing a weapon.

Nearer and nearer they came, the wild laughter echoing through Dead Man's Trace, and nearer and nearer, until only thirty paces divided them, and then, with a sudden bound to the right, the specter steed and rider disappeared in the dark foliage of the mountainside.

Instantly Iron Heart spurred to the spot; there was an opening there, for a trail led around the mountain; but no sound of hoof-beats could be heard; in fact, the ghostly animal had run in silence ever since the start.

"On, my good horse, on!" cried Dashing Dandy, and leaning low in his saddle he urged the splendid steed forward at breakneck speed, over a trail he knew nothing of.

At length there was a glimmer of white before him, and cruelly did the spurs tear the sides of his horse as he urged him on.

"Ha! I am gaining," he cried in joy, to the next moment mutter:

"No, he is climbing the mountain," and his own horse was compelled to toil slowly up the steep hillside.

But he kept the specter in sight, and now fast, now slow, now climbing the mountain, now scrambling down the steeps into the valley, the mad chase was kept up, the phantom still holding the same lead, the pursuer still determined and untiring, though his good horse panted heavily, and Dashing Dandy knew the strain on him was more than he could bear.

At length the east grew gray with approaching dawn, and then the rosy hue of sunrise filled the skies; yet still the two pressed on, and the noble black steed was slowly gaining.

Yes, gaining on the specter horse, whose steps, as seen in the broad daylight were uncertain, staggering.

"By Heaven! I have them now," came through the shut teeth of the King of Fate, and he drove his sharp spurs cruelly into the gory sides of his noble steed, who bounded forward with a despairing cry, and fell dead in his tracks!

His brave heart was broken! But Dashing Dandy—now Iron Heart indeed—went not down with his horse, but nimbly caught himself upon his feet, and rushed forward, for he saw the specter steed making another grand effort.

But it, too, was his last, for, rearing, as if in agony, he fell backward, and the specter rider was pinned beneath his weight, and the two lay motionless as the dead, while the King of Fate stood above them.

He had run the specter of Madman's Mountain to earth.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SOLVING THE MYSTERY.

WHEN Iron Heart reached the spot where the phantom horse and rider had gone down, he quickly seized the animal by the head, and with one effort of his great strength raised him from the rider, who at once sprung to his feet, and faced the man who had so persistently followed him to the bitter end.

"By Heaven! you are the outlaw, Lieutenant Ninez?" he cried, as the slender form and pale face before him he now fully recognized, in spite of the shroud-like costume stained with blood and the apparently red wound upon the left temple.

"Yes, I was the lieutenant of the road-agents; I am not now," was the low answer.

"Why have you been playing ghost for a week past as you have, to the horror of travelers?" asked Iron Heart, sternly.

"For a purpose which I have accomplished; the past night was to have been my last phantom masquerade even had you not made it so."

"Ah!"

"I speak the truth, for my purpose was accomplished."

"May I ask what that purpose was?"

"Yes; the breaking up of the band of the Black Captain."

"Yes, they have left their stronghold to become honest men they say," said Iron Heart, with a sneer.

"Bah! they will all die with a halter around their necks, or should meet that end. You are the man known as the King of Fate?" and Ninez gazed earnestly into the face of the man before her.

"I am so called."

"And you are the enemy of the Black Captain?"

"Unto the bitter end, yes," was the earnest reply.

"He has wronged you then?"

"Yes, cruelly, and I have sworn to track him to his death."

"Do you know him as he really is?"

"Yes; I can find him before sunset, if so I will."

"And am I to suffer his fate, now that I am your prisoner?"

"No; I never make war on women."

Ninez started and her pale face flushed, while she said, quickly:

"You know me, then?"

"I have penetrated your disguise. One year ago I was wounded severely; it was down in the lower prairies, and I was set upon by a desperado by the name of English Bill; you saw me and had me taken care of," and the Scout spoke with feeling.

"I do not remember ever meeting you face to face before."

"I, too, have worn disguises; I was known as Crazy Joe then."

"Ah! I believed you a poor old man, wounded and in distress."

"I was then on the trail of the Black Captain; but, little did I know when I fired at you the other day, that I brought down the one who had befriended me, as I now know you to be; I am glad that my aim was untrue."

"The bullet was well sent, only it glanced on my hard head," said Ninez, with an attempt at a laugh, and throwing back the scarf from her forehead, she showed a fresh scar.

"There is where it struck, and it stunned me, and I was buried alive; but now I thank Heaven that it was so, as by it there has come some joy to my poor life. Come, I will trust you."

She turned and started up the mountain side, Iron Heart following her in silence.

A walk of half a mile and they entered a wild-looking canyon, and soon came to a huge boulder, around which led a well-worn path.

"Here is my home now," and she halted in front of a large cavern, out of which came, as they reached the spot, a man with long iron-gray hair and beard.

He started back at seeing a stranger, and dropped his hand upon a revolver; but he would have been too late had he proven an enemy, as, with the quickness of the lightning's flash, Iron Heart had a weapon in each hand, ready to meet an enemy, had he been led into a trap.

"Father, this is my friend, Iron Heart, the King of Fate," explained the maiden, quickly.

"It was Iron Heart that shot you down," said the old man, calmly.

"Yes, and thereby led to your finding me. He knew me only as an outlaw, and fired upon me, and that act has led to good results."

"Yes. If he is your friend he is welcome," the old man assented.

"And he is the bitter foe of the Black Captain."

"Ha! then he is my friend, for I hate that man as the devil hates the Christian," and the man spoke with bitter vehemence.

"He has wronged you then?"

"More than the tears of a lifetime can ever wash out! There, take a seat on that rock, and let me tell you how he has wronged me," and in an earnest and deeply-moved voice the old man told his story of woe, as Inez Lennox told it to the man who had brought death, ruin and madness upon her family.

"And," he continued, "I was sent to a madhouse, the companion of howling maniacs; was it any wonder that I went mad, after seeing my wife murdered, my child stolen from me by her murderer, and my own hand slaying her? No, I wonder that I did not die."

"But I escaped from that mad den and wandered far and wide seeking for that man. One night I came here, to seek shelter among these rocks, and back in that black recess I found gold; ay, gold in vast quantities; but what cared I for gold without home or family?"

"Yet I made this den my retreat, and, with the cunning of a madman I lived here, going to the towns now and then for provisions and ammunition, and digging away the days in yonder cavern."

"And here your daughter found you?" asked Iron Heart, deeply interested in all he heard.

"Oh, no; one day, you should remember it, the stage-driver gave me a ride, for I was weary, and heavy laden with purchases which I was bringing home."

"That day the Black Captain halted the stage, and I sprung out, though I did not know him then as I do now, and he shrank from me, for he knew my face."

"Into the bushes I crept unperceived, and I saw what followed, saw this girl fall by your shot, little knowing that she was aught to me."

"Your men buried her, and the other two, and but partially so, for her hand protruded from the grave and on it was a ring I knew well; I had given it to her mother years before, and taken it from her dead hand to place on the finger of my little Inez."

"Out of her grave I tore her, seized her in my arms and bounded away; here I brought her, and I fell in a swoon, from which I recovered to find her bending over me."

"Then the cobwebs of madness were swept from my brain, and joy again entered into my heart."

"Now you know the rest; Inez plotted this phantom masquerade to drive the outlaws from the mountain; but you had nerve enough not to fear a spectral form, it seems."

"Yes, I ran the ghost to earth, though it killed both of our horses; but your daughter played her part to perfection, and I am glad she escaped the terrible dangers she ran, for one man fired upon her who never misses his aim."

"Nor did he miss me; his bullets flattened against a shirt of mail I wear, and which the Black Captain gave to me," confessed Inez.

"It was a terrible risk to run," answered Iron Heart.

"You run greater every day; but come, I will not forget hospitality, for we have plenty of food in our cavern retreat, and a horse for you to return to Good Man's Gulch on," said Inez, and she entered the cavern, leaving Iron Heart and her father together.

"Now that you have solved the mystery of the specter horseman, will you make it known?" asked Mr. Vaughan, anxiously, for such was the name of the old hermit.

"Oh no, I see no use in it."

"I am glad to hear you say so, for this mine is very rich, and I have a fortune already dug out, and stored in the cavern, and it would bring me too many evil neighbors."

"Here, Mr. Vaughan, do you see that mountain side yonder?" and Iron Heart pointed to a spot about half a mile away.

"Yes, there where the pines grow on that ragged rock?"

"The same; well, those pines hide the entrance to a cavern larger than this one you live in, and it too is a gold mine of vast wealth."

"You surprise me."

"It is true; I was there some time ago, and I found the cave through a map, and directions given me by a dying man."

"By profession I am a physician, and in traveling through Kansas some years ago I took the part of a poor fellow who was shot down by a crowd of ruffians."

"For days he lingered at the hotel, and I nursed him tenderly, and in return he told me the secret of his life."

"It seems he had lived at Good Man's Gulch, where his father had a cattle ranch; but his home was attacked by a band of hostile Indians, and his family killed, while he was carried into captivity."

"For a long time he was a prisoner, but at length, in the dead of winter, he made his escape, and would have frozen to death and been lost in a storm, almost in sight of his old home, had he not seen a column of smoke on the mountain side, and with great effort reached the spot from whence it came."

"It was yonder cavern, and within, he beheld a giant madman, clothed in the skins of wild beasts, and the same that gave to yonder mountain its name."

"The madman rushed upon him, and he, with what remaining strength he had, raised his pistol and fired.

"The bullet went true to its aim, and the madman fell dead, while more dead than alive, the victor sunk down by the fire that burned at the back of the cavern."

"The warmth revived him, and food, which he found in the cave, refreshed him, and then he beheld the discovery that he had made; he was in a gold mine, and heaped up upon every side, were piles of rich ore, which the madman had dug out of the earth."

"The same that I did when mad," suggested Mr. Vaughan, sadly.

"And more, he found that the lonely exile and hermit of the cave had each day kept a diary, in which he jotted down the deeds of each day and night, and there he read how, for a long while, the madman had hung upon the highway, robbing lonely travelers to get gold, and killing those who resisted, until in *Dead Man's Trace* he had made five graves."

"I know the spot well."

"Yes, it was there your daughter turned upon me last night; and, more still: the man learned the name and home of the hermit, and discovered in him the brother of his father; that the one he had killed was his own uncle!"

"He remembered him, then; when, years before, his uncle had committed forgery and fled to escape punishment, and none knew whither he had gone; but all was made clear by reading that little diary, and the nephew determined to at once return to far-away Virginia, and tell his aunt of her husband's fate, and share with her, and her daughter, whom he dearly loved, the fortune that, strange to say, her husband and himself had discovered."

"Taking what gold he could carry, as soon as the storm drifted away, he started upon his journey, little dreaming that he had kindred there within a few miles of him."

"Alas for human hopes! His aunt was dead, and his cousin had married his rival, a man he hated with all the venom in his heart, and, in despair, he retraced his way as far as Kansas, when I met him, as I have told you."

"At last he died, but, in return for my kind-

ness, he gave me his mine, and the map to find it; but there is one who has a better claim; his sister, who escaped massacre by the Indians, and lives in Good Man's Gulch; so there are two rich mines to be worked in this mountain, yours and hers, for soon I will place in her hands all claim I hold to the gold discovered by her brother."

"Come, breakfast is ready," and Inez appeared before them, no longer in her spectral garb, but in the trim-looking suit she had worn as an outlaw lieutenant.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A JOYFUL DISCOVERY.

"By ther Lord Harry, he are a-comin' now, an' ther's no use ter go lookin' for him."

"An' he are, that's a Bible fact; but he hain't ridin' ther same horse."

"He hain't, by hunky!"

The object of the above conversation was Iron Heart, and he was approaching the Travelers' Refuge at a gallop, mounted upon a wiry sorrel mare, and not the black that he had ridden away on the night before at the head of the expedition against the outlaws.

All Good Man's Gulch was in a state of ferment at what had been transpiring, for the march on the stronghold of the Black Captain was well known, as well as that it had been burned; while the determination of the agents to become honest men, was the cause of a great deal of amusement on all sides.

The fact that Iron Heart had recklessly gone off alone, in pursuit of the specter horseman, was also known, and when afternoon came and he did not return, a posse was going out in search of his body, for that he was dead none doubted, after his temerity in pursuing a ghost.

But here he came, apparently safe and sound, only on a different horse, and a wild yell of salutation greeted him as he dismounted.

"Whar's ther specter, capt'in?" yelled a miner.

"Like the road-agents, my friend, he has gone to lead a better life," was the curt reply, and passing on into the hotel, the Dashing Dandy was met by Major Tarleton, who greeted him warmly, and followed him into his room, saying:

"Iron Heart, I have made a discovery."

"And so have I; but tell me of yours, major." Stepping to the door the major called out:

"Lieutenant!"

A step was heard approaching, and a young man entered the room.

"Captain Iron Heart, under the name of Vagabond Luke, you have seen this person before; permit me to introduce him as one believed to be dead—*Lieutenant Leonidas Westfield*."

Springing to his feet, Iron Heart grasped his hand, and gazed into the face, so greatly changed, for the straggling hair had been cut, the scraggy beard shaved off, metamorphosing Illomen Luke into a handsome young man of twenty-two.

Then, too, his ragged attire had been thrown aside, and in his face dwelt a look Iron Heart had never seen there before.

"To explain, Captain Iron Heart, I will say that last night upon our return to Good Man's Gulch, this gentleman and his Indian comrade separated themselves from the party and rode down to the ranch of Judge Wharton.

"What prompted him he knows not, except that he was deeply impressed with Alice Wharton, whom you remember he rescued from VanCourt in the afternoon, and wished to see the home where she dwelt.

"And fortunate was it that he did go, for that infamous Vigilante captain, backed by several men, made another attempt to carry off Miss Wharton, and also Miss Westfield, but were thwarted by the timely arrival of the lieutenant and the Indian, who put them to flight.

"Imagine then the surprise and joy when he recognized his sister, and she found that her brother was not dead; it has made a new man of the lieutenant."

"It has indeed, sir; it has taken away the veil under which I was living, and I will let the dead past bury its dead now, and live a different life."

"And those in your cave?" suggestively said Iron Heart.

"Are free; I released them to-day, upon condition that they would leave the country; but your prisoners I turned over to Lasso Dan."

"They may go, too, for the man I seek cannot escape me now," was the quiet answer.

"Captain Iron Heart, do not consider me a merciless, revengeful wretch," said Leo Westfield, earnestly, "but those men, under their leader, the one who had sworn my life away as the murderer of Captain Vanloo, were those who hanged me at the command of their chief, and I was believed to be dead; but, Killing Warriör, whom I had befriended, dogged their steps, and, after they left, cut me down and brought me back to life."

"One by one I tracked those men and got them into my power; but the leader was my special game, and he has escaped me, for he was none other than Richard Dorsey, known here, I now know, as Arthur VanCourt; but he has escaped me."

"Yes, I have had men searching for him all

day, Iron Heart, for I will have him hanged as Vanloo's murderer, if I catch him; but I fear he has eluded us forever."

Iron Heart smiled grimly, and in it there was a world of meaning, but he said, quietly:

"Arthur Vancourt has not escaped; leave his punishment to me; and now, let me ask you to excuse me for a short while; then I will rejoin you here," and, arranging his toilet, Iron Heart left the room, and for an hour he was gone.

"Major," he said, as soon as he reentered the door, "I have a little plan on hand, by which I wish to accomplish a certain object, and I wish your aid, and also the lieutenant's."

"Assuredly," answered both gentlemen, and Iron Heart went on:

"Major, I wish you would see Firefly, and ask her to get ready to take the stage to-morrow, and you give it out that she is going, and that you are to accompany her, and be here ready to start promptly, while I wish Lieutenant Westfield to also make known that he will leave Good Man's Gulch with his sister by the same stage."

"Give these rumors out, and be ready to-morrow morning; but do not be surprised at anything that may happen, and pledge me you will not resist if attacked on the road."

"A strange request, Iron Heart, but I have confidence enough in you to give it."

"And I," also answered Leo Westfield, and they left the hotel to carry out the plans made for them by the King of Fate, and greatly wondering what it could all mean, but confident that Iron Heart was playing some deep and dangerous game.

As the King of Fate was about to leave the hotel, the stage rolled up with Hank Holbrook on the box, as he was only driving over the mountain and back, and making double trips, the other drivers refusing to cross through fear of the specter horseman.

As to whether he saw the phantom or not that day, Hank had nothing to say, and brusquely called Jim Smith to receive the two passengers, an old man, who stooped so that his face could not be seen, and walked as if a terrible sufferer from rheumatism, and a lady, scantily and poorly clad, and deeply veiled.

As soon as the landlord assigned them rooms, the lady, still heavily veiled so as to hide every feature, sallied forth and made a number of purchases at the different stores; but who the two strangers were none knew, other than their names upon the register, which were neither romantic nor aristocratic, being simply: "Henry Jones and daughter, of Connecticut."

Shortly after the arrival of the stage, Will Cody, the Pony Prince, came in, and he too was silent regarding the specter horseman, a fact that created general surprise, as the three men who should have seen him, Iron Heart, Hank Holbrook, and Will Cody, knew nothing more about him, or at least were as dumb as oysters upon the subject.

As night came on the Satan's Dominion became crowded, and heavy games were played there; but not heavy when compared with the stakes put up when Colonel Dick Burton, as polite and sinister as ever, challenged the King of Fate to play with him.

Without a word Iron Heart sat down to the table and around it gathered Hugh Tarleton, Leo Westfield, whom no one seemed to recognize as the ill-omen Luke of the mines, the Pony Prince, and in fact all of the friends of the strange man who had created such a sensation in their midst.

Whether the colonel was absent-minded, or worried, he did not show, but certain it is that he played badly, and Iron Heart, as cool as ever, arose from the table a heavy winner.

It was still early when Colonel Burton excused himself and left the saloon, but all remarked that he looked his very best, and seemed in an excellent humor, in spite of his losses.

Ten minutes after Iron Heart also departed, and with him his friends, for they dreaded an attack upon him, as they knew many of the outlaws must then be in Good Man's Gulch.

But, though they passed several groups of men, who eyed them closely, there was no demonstration of a hostile character made, and reaching the hotel the King of Fate sought his bed, and was soon sleeping as peacefully as a child.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PLAYED TO THE BITTER END.

It was a lovely morning, and the dew yet on the grass, when Hank Holbrook gave the word to his team to go, and at a slapping pace they went down the street of Good Man's Gulch, crossed the creek, sped along the valley, and then began to climb the road leading over Madman's Mountain.

Nimbly stepping, the team dragged the stage briskly along, in spite of its six passengers within, and soon passed the Vigilantes' Tree, where several horse-thieves had been hung in the early days of Good Man's Gulch.

Turning the curve at a trot, where the road led across the plateau, Hank Holbrook beheld before him the Pony Prince, dismounted and standing by the side of his horse.

Will Cody had started an hour before the stage and should have been twenty miles away. "Stand! or die!"

In ringing tones the ominous order came from behind a huge rock, and quickly Hank Holbrook obeyed and the stage came to a stand-still, while anxious faces peered out of the windows.

"Out of that hearse, all of you! I collect toll on this mountain."

None dared disobey the stern command, as, suddenly, from behind bush and rock came six armed men, all wearing black masks, and how many were yet in concealment the coach passengers knew not.

"Get out, I say!"

Quickly a man sprung out of the coach; it was Leo Westfield.

Then followed Colonel Dick Burton, and next Major Tarleton, and the old man who had stopped at the Refuge the day before with his daughter.

"There are only ladies remaining," said Major Tarleton.

"Let them get out, too!" was the response, and they were assisted to slight—first Firefly, then Leone Westfield, and last the veiled woman.

"What means this outrage? The Black Captain disbanded his men, it is said," said Colonel Burton, angrily, and seemingly willing to resist, were he seconded by the others.

"The Black Captain is here to answer for himself," said the voice that had issued the orders, and from behind a large boulder stepped a tall form clad in deep black, and with a black mask upon his face, and with the same somber-hued gloves upon his hands, in each of which he held a gold-mounted revolver.

A startled exclamation broke from the lips of one man, and he started back, crying:

"In Satan's name, who are you?"

"Seize that man!"

Ere he could resist Colonel Dick Burton was in the hands of two powerful men, and upon his wrists were clasped handcuffs.

"Curse you, who are you, I say?" he ground out through his set teeth, while all looked on in silent amazement.

"First let me see your interesting face," and stepping forward the masked man tore from the face and head of the colonel a huge black beard and wig, which none had believed false.

"Arthur Vancourt!"

The name broke from a dozen lips, as the handsome face, with its long, drooping blonde mustache and light curling hair was revealed.

"Ay, that man is Arthur Vancourt; as you know him, Colonel Dick Burton, and as I know him under several other aliases," said the Black Captain.

"In the devil's name, again I ask who are you?" almost pleadingly cried the accused man.

"I am wearing the livery of a devil to serve myself in. See, I have on your clothes, mask and all, which I procured from your iron box, buried in your stronghold."

"Ha, ha, Richard Burton Cyril, I have tracked you well."

"That name! and you know that?" groaned the trembling man, for the colonel seemed now to have lost his wonderful nerve.

"Yes, it is a name you dishonored, long years ago; it is a name that you shall die under within the hour, and the sun will shine brighter, the birds will sing sweeter, and the earth be more cheerful when no longer cursed by your living."

"Will you answer? Who are you?"

The mask was slowly raised and all started back at the face revealed: it was the same hideously scarred visage that the Black Captain had shown Firefly and Major Tarleton!

"Ha, ha; it frightens you all; but it should not you, Burton Cyril, for it is your own make, as you know, and you are an expert in making disguises; but, perhaps my face will frighten you more," and the whole disguise was thrown aside, and the Dashing Dandy—Iron Heart, the King of Fate, was revealed!

Then indeed did the wretched man shrink away, and clasp his manacled hands, the picture of horror.

"You believed me dead, but you were mistaken. You ask who I am; I will tell you.

"I am Guy Fairfax, whose sister you dragged down to ruin, though she was but a mere child; ay, became her murderer, for you deserted her and she died in a tenement-house, and above her dead body I vowed to avenge her."

"That vow I tried to keep, and I will recall that moonlight night, when we two faced each other in a duel; I fell, you believed, a dead man; you escaped, for you bribed my second to place no bullet in my pistol, knowing my deadly aim."

"But I lived, thank Heaven, and I am here to avenge my poor sister, Gertrude; I am here to avenge that old man there, Henry Vaughan, for your crimes against him; I am here to avenge Leonidas Westfield, who stands before you; the murder of Captain Vanloo; and Firefly, whom you tried to destroy; ay, and Alice Wharton, whom you would have dragged down to your level."

"Burton Cyril, there is no hope on earth for you now—but one."

"And that one?" gasped the trembling man.

"To kill me in a fair duel."

"No, no," cried several voices, and Hugh Tarleton said:

"This must not be, Iron Heart."

"My name is Guy Fairfax, major," was the quiet answer.

"Well; Fairfax, I cannot consent to this."

"You must! I know how it will end, for am I not the King of Fate?"

"Heaven grant that your confidence in Fate does not fail you now."

"It will not; you arrange for me, and let the colonel use his own revolver, and we will stand fifteen paces apart, across the grave yonder, where the outlaws were buried."

In vain was it that Henry Vaughan, Inez and the others, even to Hank Holbrook, urged against the deadly meeting; Guy Fairfax was determined, and the arrangements were made, Burton Cyril taking his position, white as a ghost, but once more in command of his nerve.

Apart stood that strange group, brought together by stranger circumstances, and fronting them, with their masks thrown aside, were Lasso Dan, Steel Grip, Lem Brigham, and the others who had masqueraded as outlaws.

With a smile on his face Guy Fairfax took his stand, and as the word came from the lips of Major Tarleton both pistols flashed almost together.

And both men remained standing; but for a moment only, for then Burton Cyril fell forward, a dead man.

But he sent his last bullet with deadly aim, for it was buried in the miniature likeness of Gertrude Fairfax, which the loving brother had worn for years over his heart, and in the end it had saved his life.

In the grave over which he fought Burton Cyril was buried, and above him, weeks after, Hank Holbrook erected a stone, and to this day stops and tells his passengers the thrilling stories of Madman's Mountain and reads aloud the quaint inscription:

"IN MEMORY
OF
THE BLACK CAPTAIN,
killed
across this grave,
in a duel with
Iron Heart, the King of Fate.
MAY HELL-FIRE BE HIS FORTION!"

CONCLUSION.

GOOD MAN'S GULCH, kind reader, is no longer a busy town, for its riches are gone from the generous earth, and elsewhere the miners dig for the

"Dross that rules the world."

But in the peaceful valley are several large cattle ranches, and on them comfortable homes, owned by men of vast wealth, who each year spend a few months amid the scenes in which they figured in the long ago.

The Wharton ranch is no longer called after its old owner the judge, for he is dead and gone, but his daughter lives there still, yet is now known as Mrs. Leonidas Westfield, and a happy pair they are.

A mile distant reside two more persons known to the reader, for they are Major Hugh Tarleton and his wife, née Leone Westfield, while just across the valley lives an old man with snow-white locks and his daughter Inez, whom only two persons, besides herself, know as having once been the Specter Horseman of Madman's Mountain.

Further up the valley is the Firefly Ranch, and its owner is called the Cattle King of Colorado, and his wife, Ida Lennox, once known as Firefly, is said to be the handsomest woman in the State, as her husband is considered the bravest of the brave, for he is our Dashing Dandy—Iron Heart, the King of Fate!

In Good Man's Gulch the Traveler's Refuge still prospers under Jim Smith, but the Satan's Dominion is defunct, having perished with its owner, the Black Captain.

Of the other characters of mystery I can only speak of Hank Holbrook as still driving stage across the mountains, and Will Cody, the Pony Prince, now known the world over as Buffalo Bill.

Of the others, Killing Warrior, Steel Grip and Lasso Dan, I have lost all trace, but suppose they are still in the mining country.

Thus ends my romance, reader mine, and if it has entertained you for a few hours, I am happy in having chosen for my hero the Dashing Dandy of the Miners—the Hotspur of the Hills to the road-agents, and Iron Heart, King of Fate, to those who felt the power of his awful vengeance.

THE END.

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